

America's Delicate Democracy

WASHINGTON – Democracy, anyone? But, yes, of course. We all want democracy. In principle we all agree as to the advantages of living in a democratic country, where there are constitutional guarantees which uphold and protect freedom of expression and enterprise, free elections, rule of law, transparent and fully accountable government, respect for minority rights, and a lot more.

Preserving and passing on key values

In reality, though, it seems that many societies –including an old democracy like the United States– are no longer able to preserve, nurture and pass on to the next generation the essential shared values that make it possible to have a well-functioning democratic republic.

Let's get this straight. A vibrant democracy needs a lot more than political pluralism and free elections held at regular intervals, as prescribed by the constitution.

Yes, these are essential preconditions. But, although absolutely necessary, they are not sufficient to guarantee an effective democracy. You can have (reasonably) free elections, and still give life to a polarized or just confused political system which produces dysfunction, or even chaos.

Basic preconditions

Here are some implicit, yet basic, preconditions without which democracy becomes a flawed mess. Any vibrant democracy is premised on a reasonably well-educated population in which most citizens/voters agree at least in broad terms as to what rule of law means. This is all about justice, fairness, protection of minority rights, unfettered openness, real access to education, to all economic activities and to the unimpeded pursuit of public office.

The citizens also agree about the goals of public policy. And this includes agreement as to where the boundaries between the private and the public spheres should be. This means that the people share a genuine understanding about the proper role of the state in providing for the truly needy and in creating appropriate and fair systems that would enhance, in fact guarantee unfettered access to economic and other opportunity to all, without at the same time creating politically inspired and justified entitlements and/or set asides for any group or social class.

Paralysis

Well, here in the United States we still have all our republican institutions protected by our Constitution. But we also have political and policy paralysis. And this prolonged paralysis tells us that, unfortunately, as a society we no longer agree on critical fundamental values.

And this did not start with the November 2016 elections. During the eight years of the Obama presidency the Republicans did their best to block or delay anything that the White House wanted to undertake. The widespread perception among conservatives and also many independent voters was that Obama was in fact not the President of the United States trying to promote policies that would benefit most Americans but an ideological leftist who wanted to remake America into a quasi-socialist state. Hence the reflexive opposition to practically anything President Obama proposed. The outcome was paralysis. Almost nothing done when the Republicans gained the majority in the House of Representatives after the 2010 mid-term elections.

Today, after the significant Republican victory of 2016, we have a populist President Trump who at least until now seems to act on changeable instincts rather than on the basis of a well laid-out, properly articulated and widely embraced strategy. The impression is that, beyond broad goals delivered

through appealing slogans, this Chief Executive is uncertain as to which are the policy tools that would take America to higher ground.

Ideological warfare

The legislative branch, in turn, is torn by deep ideological warfare, and most of all by the astounding inability of both Democrats and Republicans to elaborate and articulate in a compelling fashion their own strategic visions for America. The outcome of this is more policy paralysis. If this were only a temporary aberration, a glitch, America could survive and move on. But, as noted above, this paralysis did not start in 2016, it has been going on for a number of years, irrespective of who is in power.

Now that the (rather fragmented) Republican Party is in charge, we have the flip side of the Obama years scenario. Now we have the Democrats as almost statutory obstructionists. They will not get behind this President on anything at all, as a matter of principle. Battling them we have a disunited, in fact disjointed, Republican Party ostensibly in the majority. The Republican Party is clearly incapable, not only of attracting members of the opposition in order to form bipartisan coalitions on key policies, but also of maintaining even a modicum of unity and cohesion among its Senators and Congressmen.

This is serious. Indeed so serious that, if we cannot repair the ideological rifts and the deep divisions that make it now impossible to create viable (bipartisan) coalitions which can identify and successfully tackle policy priorities that will benefit America and its people, the very future of this old republic is in question.

Checks and balances

The fact is that, a long time ago, the Founding Fathers devised a complicated and delicate –I underscore “delicate”–

system of government that was primarily aimed at preserving Liberty.

America was not and is not about creating a strong government that “*would get things done*”. It is mostly about creating institutions aimed at protecting free people against the threat of tyranny. And for this reason the Founders came up with a complex alchemy of “*checks and balances*” : equally strong centers of power that will keep an eye on one another, this way preventing any one of them from becoming too strong, and therefore a threat to liberty.

Easy to block anything

But here is the thing. While this system of equal forces balancing one another is an effective instrument when it comes to preventing any dangerous power grab, it is also ideally suited for launching successful obstructionist efforts at multiple levels.

Simply put, preventing almost anything from getting done is relatively simple within the U.S. constitutional framework. A small group of legislators, in some instances even a single law-maker, can delay or prevent major pieces of legislation and/or critical presidential appointments from moving forward.

“Getting things done” requires a relatively high degree of political agreement within the parties and often between the parties and among various factions and interest groups within the broader American society.

Lacking such an agreement, the system becomes easily dysfunctional. And this is the way it has been for a number of years, regardless as to who is in charge in the White House or in Congress.

Delicate system

That said, Let me be clear. There is nothing wrong, as a

matter of principle, with the U.S. Constitution. What is deeply wrong is that nobody really cares very much about the fact that this American system of government is actually premised on a fairly broad consensus about the mission and the scope of government, sincerely and openly shared by both major parties and other interest groups. In other words, this American constitutional system, while old and tested, is in fact very delicate. It needs consensus.

Recreating the consensus

Indeed, the system is so delicate that it cannot properly function without a fairly high level of “upstream” consensus about shared values and consequently about what should be the appropriate functions of the federal government. These shared values should be the ideological and cultural glue that should unite most if not all citizens and their elected representatives.

Given all this, it is obvious that given this constitutional setup it is next to impossible to have a reasonably well-functioning U.S. government when vocal extreme factions vociferously advocating mutually exclusive visions are in control of the political agenda. They have created a charged environment in which “compromise” is synonym with “betrayal”. The outcome is policy paralysis. (Remember what I noted above about how easy it is to engage in obstructionist efforts while ostensibly operating within the rules of the U.S. Constitution).

Anybody out there?

It should be fairly clear by now that we have a major problem. Accepting a perennially dysfunctional federal government is not an appealing prospect.

So, here is the question. Who is actively engaged in any meaningful, non partisan effort aimed at recreating the fundamental consensus about values and basic principles that

made America possible in the first place? Anybody out there?

Black Ghetto Kids Do Not Have Options

WASHINGTON – Freddie Gray's death forced us to focus on the careless and cruel way in which police in Baltimore and elsewhere handle prisoners. The allegation that Gray died on account of injuries he suffered during a forty minute ride in a police van looks almost incredible. Indeed, how can this be?

Horrible police practices

Apparently the police officers who arrested Gray (without probable cause) handled him in the same way they handle other prisoners. He was thrown onto the floor of the police van. No standard (and mandatory) safety rules were followed. No seat belt.

He was just thrown onto the floor. And when the injured Gray asked for medical help, he got none. In fact the police made an additional stop to pick another prisoner. It was well after the van had arrived at the police station that officers checked on Gray and found him unresponsive. At that point, it was too late to save a life about to be ended by the injuries suffered during a bad ride in a police van. A bad ride that caused fatal wounds. Amazing but true. In America, in the 21st century, a ride while in police custody may kill you.

Insensitive and cruel behavior led to a death

So, there you have it. What emerges here is a grim picture of

police officers doing the dirty work of scooping up suspects in poor, high crime neighborhoods. And this practice often makes them insensitive and cruel.

I am not suggesting that the officers who arrested Gray deliberately wished to harm him or kill him. I am suggesting that they could not care less about his well being while he was in their custody. They did not listen to his requests for help. May be they thought he was faking it. May be they thought that, whatever his problem was, it could wait. And this is the sad picture about shoddy police work in bad neighborhoods. In Gray's case, shoddy turned into criminal. He ended up dead.

Gray's life

But this is only part of the story. If we dig deeper, it gets worse. Based on what we know, Freddie Gray was just a foot soldier in the vast underworld of petty crime afflicting Black neighborhoods in Baltimore and other US cities. By all accounts, Gray was not a dangerous criminal. True, he had been arrested many times. He had spent two years in jail. But he was not a violent gang leader ordering people killed.

Gray was the product and to a large extent the victim of a an urban Black subculture shaped by ignorance, illiteracy, drugs and chronic under achievement. To make things worse, as a child he was exposed to extremely high levels of lead poisoning due to lead paint used in his home. In fact there are thousands of "lead kids" in Baltimore and elsewhere. Like many others, Gray benefited from a settlement coming out of a law suit.

Lead poisoning

But the irreversible damage to his body was done when he was a toddler. According to most medical experts, high levels of lead poisoning impairs cognitive abilities, while it may be a factor in the onset of ADD. So here is Freddie Gray for you.

An impaired young man whose mother is an illiterate former heroin addict. Gray never finished high school. He ended up in jail. He made a living selling drugs.

Personal accountability

America's culture is shaped by the principle of personal accountability premised on the assumption that all people, no matter their level of education or station in life, must know right from wrong. Therefore, if you are a criminal, it is because you chose crime. If you dropped out of school, this means that you do not value education and the opportunities that it can open up for you. Which is to say that whatever happens to you on account of your bad choices, this is ultimately what you deserved.

Well, in principle this is the correct approach. There has to be personal accountability. And yes, in most cases people know right from wrong.

A child does not have real choices

But what we see here is a child growing up poor, ignorant and physically damaged. This is not his fault.

Of course, one can always think of a different scenario. The boy from the ghetto one day sees the light. He understands there is a better way. He finds a mentor. He goes to school. Against all odds, he gets a diploma. Through other help, he even gets a scholarship to go to university. And there he really blossoms. With a good degree he can start a promising career. And so he does.

And, after many years, the former ghetto kid writes a book in which he describes his story whose meaning is that "everybody can make it America, if they only show fortitude and perseverance". Look, these *rags-to-riches* stories do occur. And this is great. But they are rare.

Sadly, by far the the most common story is Freddie Gray. A young man trapped in semi-poverty by ignorance and lack of opportunity. A young man who could not see much beyond his life of petty crime –a life that eventually, in a twisted way, got him killed when he was arrested because he run away when he saw police officers coming.

In truth, did Gray have real choices? As someone who knew him well commented: “What did you expect him to become? A stockbroker? “. Indeed.

Fix the police, help the underclass

And so here we have two issues. Teaching police officers how to properly do their job, while difficult, is doable.

The real challenge for America is to find practical and constructive ways to help the underclass get out of an endless cycle of self-perpetuating poverty and join the main stream.

This is going to be hard. Really hard.

After 150 Years, We Still Mourn Lincoln's Death

WASHINGTON – 150 years ago President Lincoln was assassinated as he was watching a play. His killing, just a few days after the end of the Civil War, was an immense tragedy. Beyond the loss of his life, America lost a leader who could have steered the war-torn country in a different direction.

Johnson and Reconstruction

It was America's bad luck that, because of Lincoln's death,

Vice President Andrew Johnson, a racist, became President. He engineered Reconstruction in a way that allowed the old Southern establishment to reassert itself and circumvent, in practice, Lincoln's objective to give freedom and equality to the Black slaves.

Slavery had been abolished. But some its worst features came back via the segregation legislation passed by all Southern states. These laws relegated Blacks to the bottom of society, with few, if any, chances to emerge from poverty and illiteracy.

New course

While it would be too much to assign the entire blame of Reconstruction to President Johnson, he certainly changed the course that had been charted by Lincoln with the Emancipation Proclamation, and then the 13th Amendment that formally abolished slavery.

It took America another century to finally confront the legalized injustice of segregation. It was only in the 1960s that true equality under the law, for all Americans, was finally established.

Which is to say that leadership matters. Certainly the goal of welcoming the former Black slaves into the American mainstream would have been an immense challenge for any President.

But Johnson chose to essentially reverse course. He wanted peace and normalization with the South. And that meant looking the other way as the old White establishment reasserted itself, while pushing the former slaves down, and keeping them down for another century.

America lost a leader

Yes, without exaggeration, sometimes in history one man can make an enormous difference. And this is why the death of

Abraham Lincoln is such an immense tragedy.

He lost his life, just days after victory in a horrible war.

Without his leadership, America lost a chance to advance on the path of equality and justice for all.

How Do We Turn Immigrants Into Citizens?

WASHINGTON – Sadly, in the midst of so many strident polemics about what should be done regarding millions of illegal immigrants now here in the US (between 11 and 12 million, according to most estimates), we have not considered a central issue: *“What does it take to become an American citizen?”* Unfortunately, the heated national conversation focused only on whether illegal immigrants should be rounded up and sent away, or not.

Immigrants with no status?

Well, if we do not send them away, (massive deportation is impossible), then what? They will just “stay” here, millions of people living in America without a clear status and therefore, almost by definition, no stake and no say on any matter affecting the country they live in? Is this healthy? And, even if we assume a fast track to residency and citizenship, how do we help all of them to understand and embrace the American values and institutions without which –if you think about it– there is no America?

America is a representative democracy whose vitality is dependent on a vibrant civic culture honestly and sincerely

embraced by most of its citizens. To have in our midst more than 11 million people who are here, but without any feeling of real belonging, is not healthy.

The story of some Mexican immigrants

In a NYT op-ed, (*How Mexicans became Americans*, January 18, 2015), Journalist Sam Quinones provided an interesting picture of how large numbers of Mexican immigrants living in small communities in Southern California, after the *de facto* amnesty provided by the immigration law of 1986, little by little came to believe that they were not just immigrant workers but real Americans. Quinones gives us a good story of successful integration, even though he also describes many of the obstacles that had to be overcome.

We have no induction process

While this is a good story, what we surmise from it is that here in America we have no “induction process” aimed at helping immigrants to become citizens. In the past, it was a given that all immigrants (mostly from Europe) who landed in America had made a conscious decision to leave their country of origin for good. They had bought a one way ticket to America. They had severed their ties. Which is to say that they had come to America with the clear aspiration to become Americans.

The melting pot...

Therefore, once in America, most of them did their best to become citizens. They learnt English and tried to fit in. While the metaphor of America as “the melting pot” that as a matter of course easily turned Germans, Irish, Poles, Italians, Russians and Greeks into cheerful and enthusiastic citizens may not be totally accurate, for the most part it is. The record indicates that the larger American society, inspired by the civic culture that supports our republican institutions, managed to assimilate millions of diverse new

comers.

...No longer exists

But the “melting pot” model does not apply any more. Today we have millions of illegal immigrants who came to America from nearby Mexico or Central America, not because they want to settle here and become Americans, but only because America seems to offer better economic opportunities. Please note that there is a critical distinction between “economic immigrants” who think of their country of origin as their real home, and “would-be citizens” who want assimilation.

However, because of their murky status, these illegal immigrants cannot freely come and go. Most of them, once they get here, have to stay. Crossing the border is too risky. Some of them may want to stay for good, aspiring to become Americans. Some do not.

Guest workers program

Well, any sensible immigration reform plan should include a well designed guest workers visa programs. This would provide a choice to millions of people. If what they want is just the opportunity to work in America, so be it. Assuming that the US job market needs additional workers, (it does, especially in the agriculture sector), then guest workers visa programs should create a manageable process that will match employers and would be foreign workers.

Civic education

For all the others that want to become Americans we need to create civic education (and more) programs that will help them in their transition from immigrants to citizens. As the story told by Quinones in his NYT piece clearly indicates, these days assimilation does not take place as a matter of course. In some of the Mexican communities in Southern California, after a great deal of bad experiences, finally there was a

transformation from disorganized immigrants to citizens animated by a genuine civic culture. But this successful change cannot be taken for granted.

Real citizens

The larger American society should devise ways to help the immigrants who really want to become citizens. And this goes way beyond the *pro-forma* civics test that would-be citizens have to pass. Truly embracing American values takes a lot more effort than learning how many Senators sit in the US Senate. We cannot leave this crucial education process to chance.

It is in America's interest that all those who are here to stay truly embrace our values.

America Needs A New Interpreter Of The Old Values

WASHINGTON – Intentionally or by default, Barack Obama has become the champion of the dispossessed and of the downtrodden. Against all odds, (considering a weak economy and high unemployment), he won the 2012 re-election with a simple message: Mitt Romney and running mate Paul Ryan are “bad people”.

Evil conservatives

Their (evil?) goal, according to the well orchestrated Obama campaign narrative, was and is, (if they get another chance), to destroy the social safety nets that guarantee a semi-decent life for those who work hard but get little from a system that is stacked against them.

If you vote for me –promised Obama– I guarantee that you’ll keep your Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, Disability Insurance, and the rest of it. And I promise that I shall keep fighting for greater equality. Therefore, and mark my words, don’t be stupid. If you vote for the Republican ticket you are doomed, because they’ll take the little you have away from you.

Well, thanks in part to Romney’s unforced errors that seemed to confirm the artfully created image (by the Obama campaign) of the heartless “vulture capitalist”, Obama got re-elected.

“Sweet Populism” has no standard-bearer

But the moderate right that had placed its hope on Mitt Romney right now is a political orphan. As Pepperdine University Professor Ted McAllister points out in an extremely insightful and elegantly written WSJ op-ed piece, (*“Sweet Populism” Awaits Its Leader*, August 6, 2014), now within Middle America (traditionally centrist but leaning conservative) there is a palpable yearning for a new, inspired leader (a new Ronald Reagan) who will be able to forge a message of hope based on the reaffirmation of the “Good American Myth”, that McAllister calls “Sweet Populism”.

This is about a set of old (but still vibrant) principles that explain how “everybody can make it in America” if we would only refocus on self-reliance and industry in this rich and generous land of opportunity that always rewards personal effort, ingenuity and enterprise.

Here is the creed and the program: Let’s unleash the creativity of all hard-working Americans. Let’s tear down the barriers (taxation, hyper regulation, and what not) that stifle individual efforts. Let’s make this country great again.

Conservative and revolutionary ideas

And so, (I would add), we can be both conservatives and revolutionaries, reaffirming the eternal validity of old principles that will allow us to dream about and reach greater heights. And, while engaged in this endeavor, we shall also reaffirm this country's greatness, a greatness founded on the fundamental goodness of the American people.

"Sweet Populism": America's secret sauce

As Ted McAllister puts in his essay:

"Sweet populism is a peculiarly American species, organized around a version of the country's history that is positive and incomplete; stresses the importance of self-reliance; seeks to remove obstacles to individual empowerment when they emerge; and aims any anger it produces at those who deny the essential goodness of the American idea".

Tea Party got it half right

I fully agree. And I also agree with McAllister that the Tea Party Movement failed to capture the essence of this Good Myth. It could only articulate an emotional anti-government message. "Cut taxes and cut government". But this is not enough. Ronald Reagan's brilliance was in his ability to make himself into the prophet of a New Era of Hope, strongly grounded on the reaffirmation of old values.

The Tea Party focused on theoretically correct but in the end abstract and impractical ideas of fiscal purity. In the end, its members have been unable to produce a compelling message that would convincingly combine good ideas that will promote growth, while restraining spending. The Tea Party seems to be "anti-this, and anti-that". But it is unable to provide a warm, inspiring message that will sway Middle America.

Left: focus on injustice

As McAllister points out, the left has its myth too. But it is not in sync with the narrative of America as a Blessed Land of Opportunity. Its focus is on injustice. The rich rigged the system in their favor. As a result they get all the goodies while the rest of us, hard-working Americans, get the crumbs.

Therefore, the thrust of any progressive public policy has to be the promotion of social and economic equality. And, in order to get there, those who gamed the system now have to pay up.

As the 2012 elections have demonstrated, this “social justice” message, (combined with a weak Republican candidate), worked rather well.

America is on the wrong track

But now we are stuck. While we got out of the Great Recession, there is a general sense of unhappiness. The economy now grows, but only a little, (about 2% a year). Unemployment is down; but it is still very high, (around 6%), while millions of people who are lucky enough to be employed struggle with the meager income provided by their low paying part-time jobs, the only ones they can get.

Indeed, by coincidence the WSJ today also published the results of a national poll that shows how 71% of Americans believe that the country is “*on the wrong track*”. This high percentage of really unhappy Americans includes people who voted for Obama in 2012.

Who will lead?

As McAllister writes, the yearning for a new interpreter of the American idea of freedom, and of the promising horizons it can open up today, is there. However, the millions of American moderate conservatives need a convincing standard-bearer.

When Moral Behavior Is Based Purely On Convenience

WASHINGTON – A retired elder statesman came up with wise advice for President Obama. He just wrote that, many years ago, when he was just getting started in politics, he was told by a seasoned politician in his own state that one should always be loyal to one's friends. And he believes that this was and still is a valid guideline.

Loyalty pays

And why? Because –you see– in the long run, this is the smart thing to do. Staying loyal may carry a price. In some cases it may be inconvenient. But, look, that fact is that you will need your friends' support when things get rough. Therefore, take my advice. Be smart: stay loyal to those who are on your side. You never know, but sooner or later you will need them.

Well, in principle this piece of advice may sound self-evident and unobjectionable, even though it is clear that, in practice, many leaders do not stick to this principle. No, they turn with the wind and change loyalties, if this seems to be politically convenient.

No moral foundation

Anyway, my point here is not to debate the validity of the advice as it may apply to this or that issue.

My goal here is to point out that the advice of "staying loyal" is based entirely on what is politically smart, as opposed to being moral.

Here the advice to pursue loyalty is presented as the result

of a careful and shrewd “cost-benefit analysis”. Even though it may cost you in the short run, in the long run the smart thing to do in politics is to be loyal to your friends. Trust me, when all is said and done, this is the wiser course of action.

Loyalty is smart

So, here we are talking about good or bad tactics, and what may or may not lead to long-term political advantage, and not about moral principles. A business-like approach tells you that being loyal will benefit you more than being disloyal.

So, don't be stupid. You assess the pros and cons; and, if you are smart, you will see that it is more convenient to stay loyal to your supporters than to betray them.

Again, note that no moral principle is invoked here. The wise advice is not that “You should be loyal because this is the moral thing to do”. No, “You should be loyal, because this is the shrewd thing to do. Because it pays. “

What if being disloyal pays more?

But what if in the real world the opposite were true? What if we discovered that betraying one's supporters in fact benefits the elected leader more? Then what? Well, then the smart thing to do would be to betray. Because –you see– being disloyal pays more than being loyal.

Welcome to our unhinged world in which some do not even try to provide a genuine moral foundation for what they deem to be clever political behavior.

Politics Is About Clever Manipulation

WASHINGTON – Presumptive 2016 presidential candidate Hillary Clinton is in the news. Various articles report on her artful maneuvers to position herself as the strongest Democrat for 2016, while carefully calibrating her support for the now unpopular Obama administration in which she served for four years as Secretary of State.

Crafting the message according to polls

And so we are told about clever innuendos, about subtle distinctions and other ways in which Clinton distances herself from Obama, without however appearing openly disloyal.

In other words, ladies and gentlemen, here is how you get elected. With the invaluable help of your pollsters and focus groups specialists, you craft the message so that it will match what people want to hear, therefore assuring maximum impact on potential Democratic primary voters.

Welcome to American politics. The open secret is that Mrs. Clinton, and anybody else running for office, for that matter, will say almost anything, as long as she believes that this or that “message” will help her get elected.

Manipulation

But, if this is so, we also admit that most if not all the people running for office are not in the business of proposing political programs. No. They are in the business of clever manipulation. They do their best to cynically exploit the hopes, fears and expectations of the voters constructing messages that respond to them, in order to get more votes.

We all know this. However, nobody says anything about the fact

that we have accepted as “normal” a completely perverted political process. No TV talk show host would say to any candidate, in his/her face, that their position on this or that is patently insincere, and therefore not believable.

Politics is about getting elected

Think about it. We openly accept the fact that politics is not about having ideas and crafting them into a political program. No. None of that. Politics is about getting elected. Therefore, in order to get elected, it is perfectly logical that candidates will fine tune their message to what their pollsters say that people want to hear. Which is to say that it is perfectly normal to lie about what you believe, as long as the “message” gains traction with key voters. True, voters are gullible. They can be persuaded and manipulated.

Insincerity is the norm

Still, we do pay a price for having accepted this perversion as the normal way of conducting our politics. Sure enough, at the end of this ghastly process, someone does indeed “win”. However, by accepting that in politics insincerity is the norm, we have debased the integrity and credibility of our system.

Credibility of our institutions?

The strength of the American republic rests entirely on the credibility of its institutions. And this is largely predicated on the moral integrity of the people running for office.

If we think that a vibrant democracy can thrive while we entrust its institutions to cynical manipulators, we are really fooling ourselves.

Monticello In The Spring

WASHINGTON – A while ago I found in a Virginia thrift shop an old color photograph of Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson. The frame was cheap and dented. But the photograph was undamaged.

Monticello in the Spring

I bought it because it shows Monticello in the Spring. The famous mansion is surrounded by bright green trees and bushes full of flowers.

But there was something else that attracted me to this old snapshot. Monticello, the home of the author of the Declaration of Independence, looks beautiful and almost resplendent in the bright sunshine, while lovely flowers surround it.

It seems as if the sunlight shines right on the front entrance. The white columns are stark. It all looks solemn, and at the same time serene and inviting.

A new frame

I ordered a new, beautiful frame for this photograph. And I picked it up from the frame shop just a few days ago. And now I placed Monticello in the Spring on the wall in front of my desk. As I look, with some reverence, at this historic home, it makes me think about Jefferson and about the other Founders.

They had a dream about a workable free society that could endure, as long as its citizens and elected representatives had the wisdom to find and keep the correct balance between

the protection of individual pursuits and the caring for the common good.

The Founders' vision

How is America doing, these days? May be not so great. However, as we just celebrated another anniversary of the Declaration of Independence that Jefferson wrote, I believe that his vision of a good society in which people are mostly wise is still viable and possible.

As I look again at Monticello, Jefferson's home, surrounded by beautiful flowers and almost resplendent in the bright sun light, I really believe that it is well within our powers to continue the good work of America's Founders.

The Fourth Of July Is A Reminder To Appreciate The Gift Of Freedom

WASHINGTON— Today is the Fourth of July, the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence of 1776 —and America's most revered public holiday.

People are essentially good

Despite their determination to fight against an unjust King, the Founders of the United States of America, children of the Age of the Enlightenment, "The Age of Light", were not bellicose people. In fact they shared a fundamentally positive view of human nature.

The pursuit of knowledge

According to them, human beings are naturally predisposed to pursue greater knowledge that will enrich their spirits, and to use their improved understanding of the laws of nature, of physics and mechanics to produce tools and machines that will improve economic processes and the quality of life.

The only real obstacle between people and their overall benign pursuit of knowledge is political oppression perpetrated by a tyrannical government that, by definition, does not acknowledge, let alone abide by, the will of the people.

Freedom

The American Revolution that started with the Declaration of Independence of July 4, 1776, set in motion a process that was supposed to lead to freedom from oppression. After that, the Founders, after some initial hesitation, decided to create a Federal Government whose main objective was supposed to be the protection of liberty, via an unprecedented experiment in republican self-government.

And liberty, as we have seen above, was viewed as a blissful state in which people could pursue their interests and aspirations within the boundaries of fair laws, but without fear of governmental interference or arbitrary retribution.

Knowledge comes because of freedom

Assuming fairly educated and entrepreneurial people, freedom would be the magic yeast that would lead to the acquisition of new knowledge, more progress and therefore increased prosperity. (It is no accident that Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, among the most intellectually gifted individuals of their age, were also the founders of universities).

America attracted original thinkers

If you wonder why America has been and still is a large

laboratory and workshop where innovators from all over the world felt and feel at home, the answer is in the optimistic –and ultimately true– assumptions of our Founders. Indeed, ground breaking new ideas are hatched and grow better within a terrain made fertile by freedom.

Other countries that today want to emulate America and become laboratories of innovation, should reflect on America's history. It is not by accident that America became a magnet for people with big new ideas.

They came (and they still come) here because they understood that a free society that protects freedom and private property, including intellectual property, (as in patents, trademarks and copyrights), would be a better place in which to establish their home and their base.

Prosperity is the result of freedom

It sounds so simple. And yet it is profound. The Founders believed that human beings were mostly good and driven by a healthy desire to pursue new knowledge. This knowledge would broaden their minds and at the same time it would increase societal maturity and wisdom. Some of this new knowledge, once developed into inventions and machines, would improve the quality of life.

As we know, this linear concept of a free and happy society that would move from success to success was a bit too optimistic. Many failures along the way attest to that. Still, all in all, it was and is mostly true.

Nurturing freedom

The Fourth of July is an opportunity to reflect on the value of this incredible gift of freedom. The Founders believed that it was a "natural right". And yet they also understood that freedom was difficult to obtain, (hence the Revolution), and still quite fragile once acquired. Freedom is precious. It

must be protected and nurtured, because it is the essential precondition that makes everything else possible.

Unfortunately, if we take freedom for granted, then we do not value it, and therefore we lose sight of the infinite possibilities that it opens up.

How do we use our freedom?

The Founders knew from experience that freedom was the coveted condition that made life good and enjoyable. And we? What do we think of freedom –today– as we celebrate the revolution that gave it to us? What can we do –today– because we are free?

These are no idle questions. Indeed, unless we modern Americans can give a good answer –an answer that includes optimistic hope and the unleashing of positive energies, as opposed to confusion and self-doubt– then America’s future becomes uncertain and very cloudy.

Let us treasure and put to good use our freedom –our Founders’ precious gift.

The Tea Party Has Become An Ideological, “Anti-Everything” Group – The

Republican Party Needs A Strong Message Of Opportunity And Inclusiveness – Chris Christie Could Articulate It

By Paolo von Schirach

November 11, 2013

WASHINGTON – At the very beginning, the Tea Party insurgency had some real merit. But now it has become a motley crew of “anti-everything” libertarians mixed with social conservatives profoundly out of step with the minimum standards of modernity. Anti-abortion, anti-gays, prayers in schools, guns for everybody principles will get you some votes; but not enough to win national elections, or even statewide contests as Virginia has shown.

A good start

The Tea party Movement had a good start as a grassroots rebellion against ever-growing government and its exploding cost. The Tea Party activists could claim that their advocacy for limited government and low taxes was and is in keeping with basic American principles and traditions. ***“This is America and not France. We believe in the private sector and in a modest safety net for the truly disadvantaged. The rest is unnecessary welfare paid out to voters, so that they will keep re-electing unprincipled politicians who will keep the gravy train going, even though they know full well that this will cause higher debt and eventually fiscal disaster.”***

Now the Tea Party is the anti-everything movement

But now this “small government” platform has become a bad mix

of strident politics and ancient conservative values that as a minimum do not resonate with the broader public, while in too many instances (take abortion) they are perceived as deliberately offensive. The worst thing is that the Tea Party adherents seem to be “anti-everything”, while they are unable to rally large constituencies around programs “for something”.

Beyond that, their anti-spending platform is very thin on detail. It is easy to pick examples of stupid, wasteful and poorly conceived public spending. However, the problem is that the bulk of federal spending is about entitlement programs, and not about funding for –say– “artichoke research in Iowa”. The Tea Party people are really disingenuous when they claim that most of America’s fiscal issues are about eliminating the classic mix of “fraud, waste and abuse”. As for a well thought Tea Party entitlement programs reform plan that would take care of the elderly while bending the spending curve, we have not seen any of that.

Bad tactics

And then we have the additional problem of bad tactics. The attempt to repeal Obamacare “by force”, through a government shutdown is an indication of political stupidity. Most conservatives agreed that it was a bad idea. But the Tea Party people in the House pushed for it anyway, with disastrous political results.

And now, in case we needed more lessons, we have the defeat of Ken Cuccinelli in the Virginia gubernatorial race. While Cuccinelli in the end did much better than expected as he could capitalize on the Obamacare launch debacle, Cuccinelli’ lost in large part because his strident socially conservative themes alienated women, minorities and young voters. How on earth can anybody run against women in today’s America, as they are now more than 50% of the voters? Only die-hard ideologues want to fight again over abortion, contraception, and then prayers in school, gay rights and more.

Of course, if your goal is to fight for your principles, you have every right to do so. But if these principles constitute the platform of the Republican Party, then it may as well forget about winning major elections.

Chris Christie can lead

And this brings us to Chris Christie. He sailed to a triumphant re-election as Governor of New Jersey. In a sense, he is a new and improved, truly personable Mitt Romney, minus the Mormon faith and the Massachusetts health care reform (too close to Obamacare) issues. In a word, he is a non ideological reformist who promotes pro-growth policies. Christie combines in a nice way a combative spirit, charisma and pragmatism.

That said, it would help him immensely if his "style" (and this is not to deny that there is real substance in Christie) could be enshrined in a new, principled, easy to understand policy framework that would outline the goal of making America into an "Opportunity and Inclusiveness Society". The Republican Party would gain a great deal by having a convincing national leader convincingly reasserting its credentials as the political force championing a modern Opportunity Society. Not a Welfare Society; but an America in which the private sector and government work together to enable people to become smart and strong, so that many more of them will make it on their own.

Smart, inclusive conservatism

This is not about hand outs, special subsidies or tax relief. No, this is about a serious effort to modernize public education so that it will provide a real foundation for competing in this globalized economy. This is about simplifying regulations and the tax system, so that it will be easier to start a business and hire people. This is about an energy policy aimed at capitalizing on the huge advantage

created by America's low cost natural gas. At the same time, it would be great if the Republicans could articulate a sensible immigration policy reform that would provide a path to legal status for millions of illegal immigrants while making it easy for smart would-be immigrants who bring their talent, energy and entrepreneurial spirit to America.

Christie can do all that, this way leading a GOP revival.