

The Intransigence of Progressivism

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - September 21, 2013

As we head into autumn's debt ceiling showdown and with both sides braced for more bruising battles over the budget, progressive pundits and politicians have resumed their condemnation of conservatives as the anti-compromise camp. Among the benefits that accrue to progressives for hurling this accusation is that it deflects attention from the intransigence woven into the very fabric of contemporary progressivism.

In the liberals' telling, the Republican Party has been overrun by extremists who reject compromise on principle, preferring to lose politically than yield an inch on taxes, spending, or Obamacare. This is a caricature, but it doesn't come from whole cloth: Many conservatives -- both on the national stage and among the grassroots -- do speak as if compromise is an inherently corrupt practice that runs contrary to the American constitutional tradition.

Such uncompromising aversion to compromise is bad politics, bad constitutionalism, and bad conservatism. It confuses standing tough with standing inflexibly in place. It overlooks the multiplicity of mechanisms the framers incorporated into the Constitution to induce political moderation. And it collapses the difference between principles and policy, a distinction that the modern conservative tradition teaches is vital to the prudent defense of principle.

As the political class gears up for next year's midterm elections, and the 2016 presidential contest, the Republican Party needs conservative voices to correct the anti-compromise right's self-destructive misconception that only they can be trusted and that all deals are rotten deals.

At the same time, conservative attention to putting its own house in order should not be allowed to obscure the deep-seated progressive hostility to compromise that presents itself as true commitment to compromise.

In contrast to intransigence on the right, which proudly proclaims its refusal to budge come hell or high water, the liberal Democrats' brand of intransigence disguises itself as devotion to dialogue, conformity to morality, and reliance on reason. But their concept of dialogue is one-sided, the interpretation of morality constricted, and the progressive version of reason suffused with partisan judgments. The upshot is that progressives have managed to convince themselves that they are paragons of flexibility and open-mindedness while scorning those who diverge from the progressive party line.

President Obama exemplifies this sensibility. On the 2008 campaign trail he and his acolytes touted his ideological independence, inclination to reach across the aisle, and pragmatic approach to policy. And just the other day, in an interview with Politico, House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi characterized the president as “open, practically apolitical, certainly nonpartisan, in terms of welcoming every idea and solution.” In reality, from the stimulus package and health care reform to the current Syria debacle, Obama's favored approach to dealing with Republicans has been “my way or the highway,” even when, as in the case of Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons, his way veers this way and that.

Meanwhile, our predominantly progressive press corps fuels progressive intransigence. For example, Obama and congressional Republicans reached an agreement last December in which each side could claim an important victory: Republicans impelled the president to make permanent the Bush tax cuts for 98 percent of earners and the president forced Republicans to agree to tax increases on the highest-earning 2 percent.

Left-leaning pundits nevertheless disparaged GOP concessions as caving while praising the president for holding firm. That asymmetric message was bound to encourage intransigence in both camps but not in symmetrical fashion. Conservatives recognized that they will be damned if they do compromise and progressives saw that they will not be damned if they don't.

Legions of university professors provide the theoretical perspective that legitimates and camouflages progressive intransigence. Sometimes it goes by the name of “public reason.” Sometimes it flies under the flag of “deliberative democracy.” Sometimes it is couched as an expression of empathy. It is promulgated in the social sciences and humanities, in law schools and at popular interdisciplinary university centers on ethics and the professions. Its main idea is that moral public policy can be derived from dialogue constrained by reason.

In reality, however, the theory favored by progressive professors redefines dialogue as that which people would agree to if they were emancipated from their actual desires and opinions and instead guided by morality and reason progressively understood. By this ruse, the scholarly community -- under the cover of dialogue, morality, and reason -- banishes from the conversation those who contest progressive premises and policies.

And by this ruse, progressivism fortifies its character as a crusading and self-certifying faith whose adherents believe themselves the embodiments of morality and reason and the only legitimate spokesmen for the people's will. Progressives do not call those who dissent from progressivism apostates because that would be unreasonable and do not burn them at the stake because that would be immoral. But they do denounce dissenters as fanatics, zealots, and know-nothings who put self-interest before the public interest and party before country.

The provocations of progressive intransigence help explain the rise of the anti-compromise faction among conservatives. But the provocations do not justify it. What is needed is a renewal of the conservatism that takes its bearings from the Constitution and the political theory that undergirds it. A constitutional conservatism teaches that the defense of liberty requires balancing the competing claims of democracy, the rule of law, free markets, family, faith, national security, and more. Political moderation, such a conservatism teaches, represents not a deviation from principle but the virtue by which the principles of liberty are harmonized.

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