

The Myopic Madness of the GOP

Pretty much the entire field of Republican presidential candidates embraces hostility toward the federal government, driven either by religious fervor or a belief in unregulated capitalism. The GOP hopefuls are appealing to a large subset of the U.S. population that resents the modern world and the lessons of history, as Lawrence Davidson notes.

By Lawrence Davidson

A phenomenon that I call “natural localism” concentrates most people’s attention to the limited geographical area within which they live, work and study.

Inside their local zone, people can have first-hand knowledge, but they are also led (again quite naturally) to conform their views to those of their neighbors, their friends, their fellow workers, their religious congregations, etc.

In many of these categories, there will be personalities who stand out as leaders and they often have great influence in shaping the perceptions of local populations.

Beyond their local zone most people know little of what is real. Many folks are simply indifferent to the world beyond their own personal sphere.

And, most of those who might periodically become interested in what is happening on the other side of the hill, will tend to go with the opinions of their community leaders and, of course, the mass media.

The United States certainly suffers from the drawbacks of “natural localism” and sometimes the consequences are extreme.

You can see it in the periodic xenophobia that shapes the perceptions of local groups when it comes to migrant workers and immigration in general. You can see it in the periodic episodes of resurgent racism, as in the present case of Islamophobia.

But perhaps the most startling extreme expression of this phenomenon is the full-blown fear, suspicion and even hatred of the federal government by up to 20 percent of the American population. This extreme “natural localism” is expressed by a demand that the federal government go away and leave everyone alone.

There should be no taxes, no regulatory agencies, no social programs, no Internal Revenue Service and the like. In fact, within this scenario the only federal government activities that are sacrosanct are the military and the courts. All other responsibilities can be jettisoned.

If all these myopic extremists, born and bred to “natural localism,” lived in one state, they would no doubt want to secede from the Union. And personally I would be glad to see “the erring sisters go in peace” (to quote Horace Greeley). Unfortunately, they are too scattered about for this, particularly in the South, Midwest and Southwest.

These individuals also have found ways to assert the primacy of their quite limited worldview. A few have taken to murderous violence, though the numbers are surprisingly small given this group asserts the sanctity of gun ownership and is armed to the teeth.

More generally they have settled on the tactic of participating in the very politics they scorn so as to accomplish an end run into enemy territory. If and when their leaders gain high office their ultimate goal is to kill off large parts of the federal government – from the inside.

To this end the myopic extremists have infiltrated and transformed the Republican Party. If we take a look at the candidates competing for the Republican presidential nomination, all of them want to radically downsize the federal government.

Some take this stand because they believe God has told them to do so. For example, Minnesota Rep. Michele Bachmann, who recently won the Iowa straw poll, sees herself fighting on the side of the angels.

With a pseudo law degree from Oral Roberts University, she has been taught that “God grants certain authority to government, the Church and the family ... and if the government infringes on those rights by exceeding the authority it was granted by God, then that’s tyranny.”

Bachmann was also taught at Oral Roberts that one must seek to institute “biblical law over man’s law in jurisprudence and in politics.” That is what she is out to do.

Texas Gov. Rick Perry, a pseudo-prophet and a George W. Bush want-to-be, is of the same mind. Also probably fitting in this category is Rick “marriage is our ultimate homeland security” Santorum.

Then there are those who do not rely on religion but rather push a historically bankrupt philosophy of unregulated capitalism. Here we find folks like Newt “the invention of beach volleyball is what freedom is all about” Gingrich, Mitt “corporations are people too” Romney and others.

Actually, the only one of these presidential hopefuls who is, partially, in his right mind is Rep. Ron Paul of Texas. His strong desire to end the wars in the

Middle East is absolutely sane, but move the discussion into domestic politics/economics and he becomes as nonsensical as the rest of the Republican field.

Behind this cadre is a hinterland of people whose perceptual capacities are dangerously narrow. These are the people who are mesmerized by right-wing talk radio and the preaching of Christian right-wing ministers. They are mostly white, mostly middle-aged and publicly identify themselves as conservatives.

Again, we are probably talking about 15 to 20 percent of the U.S. population. Many of them are "Tea Party" members. But the "tea-sters" are just the angry tip of the iceberg. There is an additional quiet but supportive group who sympathize with these radicals. This runs to about 32 percent of the adult population.

One might think that one-fifth to one-third of those qualified to vote is a far cry from a governing majority, but that would be a mistake.

For the last 50 years, the voter turnout in federal elections has averaged about 47.5 percent with individual elections ranging from 36.4 to 63.1 percent. Given these low turnout numbers, smaller groups, which are well organized and motivated, can run away with an election.

What these myopic extremists do not know, or chose not to believe, can hurt us all. If they take over the federal government (and, if you have not noticed, they now control the House of Representatives), things like environmental regulations, health and safety regulations, banking and other fiscal regulations, Medicare and Medicaid, and even Social Security are all in mortal jeopardy.

The consequences will make the corruption of the 19th Century's Gilded Age look like child's play. And, assuming Ron Paul does not win in this fray, our new potential leaders have all indicated that they will once more take up the standard of George W. Bush and possibly lead us into war with Iran.

Where will they get the money for that? Not from taxation! Not from running a deficit! They hate such things. Well, they are ideologically against Social Security. It has a sizable reserve fund. Maybe they will rob that.

What Bachmann et. al. have done is to mistake their narrow range of vision for either God's universe or some form of holy ideology. Having done so, all who can see farther than they can become idolaters against whom a crusade must be waged.

There is no speaking sweet reason to people on a holy crusade. If you think you can negotiate with them and come to some sort of compromise, just take a look at President Barack Obama's experience dealing with the House of Representatives

during the debt crisis.

But aren't there ways for people and communities to by-pass "natural localness" and see the world in a more cosmopolitan way? The answer, at least potentially, happens to be yes.

One of the longstanding aids with potential in this area is the public school system. It is quite possible to teach awareness of other cultures, other religions, other economic ideologies, other forms of government, etc. and instill in our children tolerance for that which is different. It takes teaching tolerance from K-to-12 consistently over generations to do this, but it is possible.

But guess what! The myopic extremists are suspicious of public education and much more enthusiastic about "home schooling." They think public schools are brainwashing their children and in a certain sense they are right.

One of the purposes of education within the nation state context is to produce good citizens. But for the myopic crowd that means loyalty to an unholy political system and the federal government. They have plans to change that.

You can add federal aid to education to that long list of things that will disappear once the extreme right truly has its way.

In the end, the best prevention against these people is to motivate the rest of the voting population to actually turn out at the polls and elect sane alternative candidates.

As the development of third parties seems a non-starter in America, it is up to the Democratic Party to supply those alternative candidates and to work up the necessary motivation.

Can the Democrats do this? I am afraid the hard truth is, it ain't a sure thing.

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