

STATEMENT DP802

Politics without Truth

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How long can a free republic exist in the absence of the worldview that gave birth to it? The recent presidential election and its tangled aftermath were not just about politics. They were about worldviews gone awry.

The United States of America was founded on a set of specific assumptions: “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” wrote Thomas Jefferson in The Declaration of Independence, “that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.” That is to say, no one human being is intrinsically better than anyone else, because everyone is a creature of God. Furthermore, God has given human creatures, made in His image, certain rights, which can never be taken away because they were endowed by a transcendent God.

It is self-evident that God created human beings and that moral truths are transcendent; these assumptions can be taken for granted across the board, even by non-Christians, such as the deist Mr. Jefferson. Moreover, this particular view of the universe is leavened by other notions, such as human sinfulness, the source of James Madison’s carefully designed balance of powers to prevent any part of the government from tyrannizing the rest. Indeed, this view designed the American republic.

Today, however, the notions of a Creator and a transcendent moral law are no longer “self-evident.” In fact, the nation’s cultural elite routinely attack them. In today’s postmodern climate, truth — whether moral, intellectual, or even scientific — is not grounded in a Creator, nor is it objectively determined at all. Rather, truth is something we construct for ourselves. What we think of as true has been determined either by the cultural group in power or by our own personal views. In other words, we are our own creators, and what is true for one person may not be true for someone else, unless we manipulate them or coerce them into seeing the way we do. Objective facts, principles, or laws have nothing to do with it.

As for rights, contemporary culture is very fond of them, but they are endowed not by any God but by the state. Rather than expressing a moral reality above and beyond the individual and the culture, rights are seen as a construction of society, acting through its governing bodies. Indeed, our government has been constructing rights with great abandon — abortion rights, gay rights, animal rights — rights that can be found nowhere in the Constitution, the Bible, human reason, or nature itself. This is no formula for freedom: rights granted by the state can be taken away by the state. Unlike the case in the biblical universe, rights are no longer “inalienable.”

That Americans today have difficulty with the concept of objective truth is evident in the aftermath of the last year’s presidential election. Who won Florida? We had some good statistics, counted and recounted, that offered a close, though definitive answer; yet, for postmodernists, all objective truth is problematic and open to “interpretation.”

Modernists trust science and technology; postmodernists can make a case against a voting machine. The voting results were opened up to the subjectivity of human counters, whose interpretation of the degree to which a chad of paper was punched out would determine the leader of the free world.

As hand-counters held up ballots to the light, the issue went to the courts to sort out how the election should be conducted. Indeed, the law has premodern standards, coming out of a worldview in which truth is objective and knowable. The law recognizes the possibility of perjury, swearing oaths to give truthful testimony, and determining through rigorous procedures the facts of a case.

Unfortunately, postmodernist legal theory teaches that judges can also construct their own interpretations. The Constitution need not be interpreted according to its original meaning or even its original text. It must be interpreted

as a dynamic, living document, according to the needs of the time. It is quite legitimate, according to postmodernist lawyers and judges, to read things into the Constitution, such as the right to an abortion, and an interpretive paradigm to justify such a thing can always be devised later.

The Florida Supreme Court seemed to have that kind of legal theory, letting the recounts go on, subject to the individual interpretation of the counters. The U.S. Supreme Court is currently divided between three liberal jurists, who favor the dynamic view of the Constitution, and three “strict constructionists,” who insist that the Constitution does have an objective meaning. Three more justices are swing voters, who sometimes favor one side and sometimes the other.

When the outcome was decided on the basis of an objective application of the law, pundits on the left howled. Because they believe truth is subjective, they could not conceive of any other explanation than that the conservative judges arbitrarily selected the conservative candidate. Because they believe truth is a matter of power, they claimed they were being oppressed, even though they were quite willing to exercise their own power to get what they wanted.

One more implication of postmodernist politics: because truth is personal, the best way to argue with someone you disagree with is not to try to persuade him or her according to the objective canons of reason or evidence. Since these objective criteria do not apply, there being no transcendent Creator, what one has to do is destroy the person who holds those beliefs; thus, the “borking” of judicial candidates such as Robert Bork and Clarence Thomas, the construction of lies (lying being a legitimate technique since truth is whatever we make it), and vicious personal attacks. The result was the use of unfounded ridicule to discredit President Bush and attempts to destroy the reputation of conservative cabinet nominees.

When the dust settled, we seemed to have ended up with a president who does — unlike the last one — believe in absolutes, someone for whom biblical assumptions about transcendent truth are “self-evident.” There is still hope for the Republic, but governing people who do not share his assumptions will be his biggest challenge.

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