Divided, We Stand

Thomas Massaro | MAY 17, 2010

Back in the days when Jesuits in seminary studies had to endure batteries of intimidating oral exams, the traditional advice offered to a quaking scholastic was direct: always distinguish. The board of examiners might try to trick an unsuspecting examinee into affirming or denying a simple thesis that in actuality required large doses of nuance. Remembering to introduce the appropriate distinctions in key categories often supplied the shortcut through the intellectual minefield. This particular pearl of wisdom saved me several times.

Recent events on the national stage lead me to recall this morsel of Jesuit arcana. Especially since the passage of the health care overhaul several weeks ago with nary a Republican vote, many observers have yielded to the temptation to render certain simplistic judgments about the state of our national temper. Has President Obama's success on this pivotal issue unleashed a veritable avalanche of resentment that will prove impossible to rein in? Is the backlash indeed on the verge of cascading into political violence?

We have weathered more intense episodes with our unity intact. A good number of media pundits would have us believe that America is teetering on the brink of a civil war. They cite just enough evidence for concern (Tea Party movement rhetoric, death threats against lawmakers, F.B.I. investigations of the Hutaree group, vandalism on Capitol Hill) that predictions of widespread civil strife being just around the corner have gained some superficial plausibility. But before we buy wholesale into a "Chicken Little" scenario, it would be wise to recall the lesson about useful distinctions.

We should not equate scattered expressions of frustration with clear and imminent danger to our republic. Watching people blow off steam is not the same as witnessing the opening salvos of a violent revolution. While the nation is not completely free of right-wing extremism, neither is it on the verge of civil chaos. There is nothing humorous about the hate-motivated incidents that do pop up from time to time, but we are hardly witnessing a massive insurgency.

What we are in fact witnessing is a fairly strong bout of partisan divisiveness that has gained some momentum as it ripples outward from the halls of Congress. Millions of people are stepping forward to embrace the antagonistic posture that they are indeed “mad as hell”—angry not just about a new set of health insurance arrangements, but often about a range of recent measures that they interpret as federal overreaching, including elements of the stimulus package and various financial bailouts. This phenomenon of “rage on the right” is anything but new in a nation founded on a tax revolt. It is also worth recalling the rather intense “rage on the left” not so long ago, which often went by the name “Bush bashing.”

Just how serious, in the grand scheme of things, is our current fit of temper? I doubt that even latter-day historians will be able to construct a reliable “vitriol index” to adjudicate such matters. But it is comforting to recall that we have weathered more intense episodes of fractiousness with our national unity intact.

Indeed, it would be surprising if the settlement of a divisive issue like health care reform did not spark a good deal of backlash. From the days of Shays’ Rebellion to the tax revolts of recent decades, recurring bouts of
antigovernment sentiment have been a constant in U.S. politics. Some episodes have rightly induced concern, but the smart money is still riding against predictions of a bloody apocalypse anytime soon.

In the end, the good sense of the American people deserves our deepest confidence. Displaying the pragmatic centrism that has served our nation so well through its trials, the American populace instinctively accepts compromises and half-loaf solutions as the very staff of politics. In our most laudable political culture, resorting to violence is recognized for what it is: an admission of one's own failures to be patient and creative enough to win support for one’s proposals. As long as our democratic system of government remains responsive to demands for the redress of grievances, political legitimacy and stability will be maintained, no matter how incendiary the rhetoric of populist anger might grow.

Sure, there are rifts today, but marking the past will help us distinguish garden-variety partisan bickering from serious threats to our nation.

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