



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on December 19, 2012

“Forward” to the Past?

The political slogan “Forward” served Barack Obama well during this year’s election campaign. It said that he was for going forward, while Republicans were for “going back to the failed policies that got us into this mess in the first place.”

It was great political rhetoric and great political theater. Moreover, the Republicans did virtually nothing to challenge its shaky assumptions with a few hard facts that could have made those assumptions collapse like a house of cards.



More is involved than this year’s political battles. The word “forward” has been a political battle cry on the left for more than a century. It has been almost as widely used as the left’s other favorite word, “equality,” which goes back more than two centuries.

The seductive notion of economic equality has appealed to many people. The pilgrims started out with the idea of equal sharing. The colony of Georgia began with very similar ideas. In the midwest, Britain’s Robert Owen — who coined the term “socialism” — set up colonies based on communal living and economic equality.

What these idealistic experiments all had in common was that they failed.

They learned the hard way that people would not do as much for the common good as they would do for their own good. The pilgrims nearly starved learning that lesson. But they learned it. Land that had been common property was turned into private property, which produced a lot more food.

Similar experiments were tried on a larger scale in other countries around the world. In the biggest of these experiments — the Soviet Union under Stalin and Communist China under Mao — people literally starved to death by the millions.

In the Soviet Union, at least 6 million people starved to death in the 1930s, in a country with some of the most fertile land on the continent of Europe, a country that had once been a major exporter of food. In China, tens of millions of people starved to death under Mao.

Despite what the left seems to believe, private property rights do not exist simply for the sake of people who own property. Americans who do not own a single acre of land have abundant food available because land is still private property in the United States, even though the left is doing its best to restrict property rights in both the countryside and in the cities.

The other big feature of the egalitarian left is promotion of a huge inequality of power, while deploring economic inequality.

It is no coincidence that those who are going ballistic over the economic inequality between the top one or two percent and the rest of us are promoting a far more dangerous concentration of political power in Washington — where far less than one percent of the population increasingly tell 300 million Americans what they can and cannot do, on everything from their light bulbs and toilets to their



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medical care.

This movement in the direction of central planning, under the name of “forward,” is in fact going back to a system that has failed in countries around the world — under both democratic and dictatorial governments and among peoples of virtually every race, color, creed, and nationality.

It is one thing when conservative leaders like Ronald Reagan in America and Margaret Thatcher in Britain declared central planning a failure. But what really puts the nails in the coffin is that, before the end of the 20th century, both socialist and communist governments around the world began abandoning central planning.

India and China are the biggest examples. In both countries, cutbacks on government control of the economy were followed by dramatically increased economic growth rates, lifting millions of people out of poverty in both countries.

The ultimate irony is that the most recent international survey of free markets found the world’s freest market to be in Hong Kong — in a country still ruled by communists! But the Chinese communists have at least learned, the hard way, a lesson that Barack Obama seems oblivious to.

We are going “forward” to a repeatedly failed past, following a charismatic leader, after a 20th century in which charismatic leaders led countries into unprecedented catastrophes.

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