



Conservatives? Or Destructionists?

Anyway, nearly all of us who remember Vietnam remember one of the great quotations that came out of the war, the explanation from an army officer who said, "We had to destroy the village in order to save it." That quotation delighted the opponents of the war, for it suggested a turn of mind that had come to be known as "Orwellian," since George Orwell satirized it so well in *1984*: "WAR IS PEACE. FREEDOM IS SLAVERY. IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH."



In other words, what Orwell described as "Newspeak" consisted of using words to mean their exact opposites. Thus in his *Animal Farm*, obvious inequality becomes a higher form of equality: "Some animals are more equal than others." It is an oxymoron, of course. Some can't be "more equal" than others. Either they are equal or they are not. It's like what columnist Lou Cannon said about Ronald Reagan at about the midpoint of the Gipper's first term: "I think he's getting a fairer press than he deserves." He no doubt meant a more favorable press than he deserved. But it couldn't be fairer than he deserved because what is fair or just is, by definition, what is deserved.

That is why people have a hard time understanding grace in theology. They confuse justice with mercy and define each their own way. The distinction was made rather clear by a preacher who used the example of a woman who complained to a portrait photographer that her pictures did not do her justice.

"Ma'am," replied the photographer, "what you need is not justice, but mercy."

Now, during the Vietnam War, most of the opponents were, or at least were widely believed to be, on the political left, a category broad enough to include liberals, progressives, socialists, pacifists and, of course, Communists. And it seemed strange to some of us conservatives at the time that so many of them laughed derisively at the supposed absurdity of "We had to destroy the village in order to save it." Because liberals and progressives had generally been in favor for years of destroying neighborhoods in order to save them. They called it urban renewal.

Now there is much about war that resembles urban renewal. An aerial photograph of a bombed out city looks a lot like an urban neighborhood shortly after the federal wrecking ball and bulldozer had cleared away the homes of slum dwellers, owned by slumlords, to make way for a new development that would benefit the poor, underprivileged owners of upscale shopping malls or a university that needed more



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buildings for educable, upwardly mobile youth. That, of course, was “progress.”

That is what came to my mind when I first saw another one of those great quotations from military officers and their civilian overlords, this time from Donald Rumsfeld when he was Secretary of Defense during the Iraq War. Noting how the rising death count was beginning to dampen enthusiasm for “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” Rumsfeld explained it this way:

“Death has a tendency to encourage a depressing view of war.”

Well, of course, I thought! Except for the incidents of death, war wouldn’t be so bad at all. It would be nearly as benign as urban renewal, carried out on a grander, global scale. And so I saw that conservatives, as well as liberals, were at least ambivalent about the creative power of destruction.

Now those who call themselves “conservatives” in American politics today are also into “creative destruction,” but on the home front at least, they like to see it accomplished by private enterprise in relatively free markets. Not that many conservative Republican real estate developers were turning down contracts the “feds” offered for destruction and rebuilding. As Ronald Reagan’s budget director, David Stockman, noted in his book, *The Triumph of Politics* one reason the federal urban renewal program was so hard to kill in what was supposed to have been the most conservative administration since Coolidge’s was that a great many Republican businessmen were all for it. Just as the agriculture lobby is hot for food stamps, ethanol and what have you.

But there is another way, having nothing to do with free markets, that conservatives like destruction. Conservatives, many of them at least, like the “creative destruction” of war. They look with pride at how we destroyed Germany and Japan in World War II and then helped rebuild them and they think, “Shucks, why can’t we do that all over the world?” Sure, war is messy, but America has always provided a clean up committee. “And if we do Iraq, we’ll rebuild it,” Rush Limbaugh announced matter-of-factly on his radio program during the run-up to the Iraq War. Never mind what it will cost in dollars alone. Today, being “conservative” means you never have to count the cost. Never mind the lives that would be lost and those that would be ruined and shattered, with lost or crippled limbs or eyes, not to mention psychological damage. We honor them when we sing “God Bless America” in the seventh-inning stretch. That’s what “compassionate conservatism” does in our “kinder, gentler” America.

Meanwhile, we could have our wars and tax cuts, too. We would continue borrowing from China to wage war in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Whatever-stan and other far away places with strange sounding names. Damn the cost! Conservatives were proud to stand “shoulder to shoulder with President Bush,” who told us, without any real evidence to substantiate it, that the Iraq War was necessary to defend our national security. Big Brother had spoken. And America went to war.

And destroyed much of Baghdad and the rest of Iraq, once known as Babylon, a land named after the biblical Tower of Babel. Perhaps that’s why America had to “liberate” it. For there is much of ancient Babylon in Washington, where politicians do quite a bit of “babbling.” Lord knows Rummy the Great did his share.

“Freedom’s untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things.” That was Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld’s response to reports of widespread looting in Iraq after we had toppled the Saddam regime. “Stuff happens,” the Secretary explained.

We send our troops all over the world to defend and promote “freedom,” even though for many freedom only means the opportunity to, as Rumsfeld said, “commit crimes and do bad things.” But freedom is not the only thing that is “untidy.” So is the thinking of our rulers in Washington. Ron Paul described it well



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when campaigning for President in 2008.

“We tax the American people to bomb bridges in Iraq,” Paul explained. Then they tax us again to rebuild the bridges in Iraq. “Meanwhile,” Paul noted, “our bridges are falling apart.” Or as the less ideological, more pragmatic former Defense Secretary has explained. “Stuff happens.”

You can call that wasteful. You can call it destructive. But I cannot, for the life of me, see how you can call it “conservative.” We need a new moniker for the “neocons.”

They might better be called the “Stuff Happens” Republicans, or the Stuffhaps” for short.



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