



Lessons for Republicans: Speak to the Heart, not the Head

Given all of the precious time that they have invested in talking about the gazillions in debt with which Democrats are saddling future generations, it appears that Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan have imbibed their party's conventional wisdom to the last letter.

From the outset of this year's presidential election, it has been said over and over again by many a Republican commentator that, far from getting "personal," the Republican challenger(s) simply has to address President Obama's "failed policies" in order to make their case to the American electorate. Just explain what Obama has done, so goes this reasoning, and the American People — always attentive and eager to do the right thing — will act accordingly at the ballot box.



Plato referred to all socially useful lies as "convenient fictions." The idea, relentlessly promulgated by Democrats and Republicans alike, that the American voter is a bottomless font of virtue and wisdom is the convenient fiction par excellence of our day: Considering that every partisan who parrots this line disagrees vehemently on virtually all things with about half of their compatriots, no one can possibly believe it.

The average person, whether American or otherwise, is not moved by allusions to bare facts alone. Actually, naked facts move no one.

What moves most people is a good story designed to appeal primarily to their emotions — not their intellect.

Such a story need not be devoid of facts, but — if they are to inspire action — the facts need to be included in the story.

Given that the average American is far more interested in who will be America's next "Idol" than in who will be its next president, one would think that it should go without saying that talk of remote abstractions like some unfathomable national debt promises to be of little effect.

Of course, it isn't that the issue of our debt isn't of importance. But of greater importance, from the standpoint of the average American, is that he has to spend more of his earnings on gasoline for his car than he has ever had to spend in the past. Of greater importance is that he is now spending more on groceries than ever before. Of greater importance is that the average American, or someone who he knows and cares for, can't find a job.

All of these ugly facts — stone cold realities that your average American feels throughout every one of his bones — can be easily packaged into a narrative that has as its chief antagonist the man who four



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years ago pledged to “fundamentally transform” the United States as we have always known it. The narrative would make abundantly clear that this is the same man who had spent all of his adult life surrounded by the worst anti-Americans, radicals whose detestation for the country culminated in acts of domestic terrorism.

The villain of the story — we are all suckers for a good (and even not so good) morality tale — is Barack Hussein Obama, the Architect of the miseries with which Americans have had to live for the last four years.

Man does not live by brute reason alone. The more conservative-minded theorists of yesteryear knew this.

The seventeenth century French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist, Blaise Pascal, stated: “The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing.” We should be on guard against overestimating the power of the intellect, Pascal insisted, for “the supreme function of reason is to show man that some things are beyond reason.” In the final analysis, Pascal concluded, “all of our reasoning ends in surrender to feeling.”

Another French essayist, Michel Montaigne, said: “Our normal fashion is to follow the inclinations of our appetite, left and right, up and down, as the winds of occasion bear us along.” A human life is nothing other than “motion and inconstancy,” and “our willing of anything is never free, final or constant.” At another place, Montaigne asserted that “even when our trust is readily placed in them, reasoning and education cannot easily prove powerful enough to bring us actually to do anything....” He continues, swearing that “reason is so inadequate” and “so blind, that there is no example so clear and easy as to be clear enough for her....” For reason, “the easy and the hard are all one,” and “all subjects and Nature in general equally deny her any sway or jurisdiction.”

The eighteenth century Scottish philosopher David Hume famously declared: “Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.” He also said that “eloquence, at its highest pitch, leaves little room for reason or reflection, but addresses itself entirely to the desires and affections, captivating the willing hearers, and subduing their understanding.”

The great Edmund Burke reminded his contemporaries, and ours, that: “We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason,” for “we suspect that this stock in each man is small....” Rather, “instead of casting away our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree,” for “prejudice, with its reason, has a motive to give action to that reason, and an affection which will give to it permanence.”

More recently, in the twentieth century, Joseph Schumpeter took a machete to what he called “the classical doctrine of democracy.” According to this doctrine, the democrat is a rational agent who weighs over facts, draws out their implications, and then chooses accordingly. This, Schumpeter judged in no uncertain terms, is a fiction of the first order.

“The ways in which issues and the popular will on any issue are being manufactured,” Schumpeter states, “is exactly analogous to the ways of commercial advertising.” That is, “mere assertion, often repeated, counts more than rational argument” for the average voter. Rational argument takes a back seat as well to “the direct attack upon the subconscious” inflicted upon him by politicians and their accomplices in the news media. As in commercial advertising, these attacks assume “the form of attempts to evoke and crystallize pleasant associations of an entirely extra-rational ... nature.”



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Schumpeter concludes:

“Thus the typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. He becomes a primitive again. His thinking becomes associative and affective.”

Men are not moved by reason alone. An example from early American history illustrates well this truth. In his magisterial, *Liberty and Freedom*, David Hackett Fischer relays an exchange that transpired in 1843 between Mellen Chamberlain and Captain Levi Preston. The former was a young scholar in search of the roots of the American Revolution. The latter was a 91-year-old veteran of the War for Independence.

Chamberlain wanted to know why Preston fought at Lexington and Concord. “Were you oppressed by the Stamp Act?” he asked. Preston replied that he had never seen any stamps and, in any event, “I always understood that none were ever sold.”

Next Chamberlain asked him if it was the tea tax that had provoked him. Preston scoffed at this suggestion just as forcefully as he scoffed at the idea that he may have felt oppressed by the Stamp Act. “Tea tax? I never drank a drop of the stuff. The boys threw it all overboard.”

When Chamberlain questioned whether Preston had drawn his inspiration from such great theorists of liberty as [James] Harrington, [Algernon] Sidney, and [John] Locke, the old man said bluntly: “I never heard of these men. The only books we had were the Bible, the Catechism, Watts’ Psalms, and hymns and the almanacs.”

Finally, as if to throw up his hands in exasperation, Chamberlain asked: “Well, then, what was the matter?” Preston’s response is telling. “Young man,” he began, “what we meant in going for those Redcoats was this: we always had been free, and we meant to be free always. They didn’t mean that we should.”

It is not reason, not bare facts, from which our motion originates. Republicans need to remember this the next time they are tempted to use a televised debate or a campaign speech for but another opportunity to throw around abstract numbers about debts and deficits and anything else.



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