



Friday, January 13, 2011

Politics as Usual?

If the attack ads between the Republican primary candidates seem negative now, we need only wait until the general election ramps up full court and speed to plunge to new depths of attacks on person and ideas. Our leadership and candidates for replacement seem bent on stressing the negative. Pessimism seems to trump optimism at every turn. Did you ever wonder why negative attacks are so effective, especially when we claim to prefer ideas, values, and optimism to characterize the public debate?

In their book *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, Chip and Dan Heath spend a few pages examining our human tendency to dwell considerably more on the negative, the problems, more than on the solutions. As an illustration they took the first 24 words describing human emotions, in alphabetical order, from a “Learn English at Home” website. Judge for yourself:

ANGRY	ANNOYED	APPALLED	APPREHENSIVE
ASHAMED	BEWILDERED	BETRAYED	CONFUSED
CONFIDENT	CHEATED	CROSS	DEPRESSED
DELIGHTED	DISSAPOINTED	ECSTATIC	EXCITED
EMOTIONAL	ENVOIOUS	EMBARRASSED	FURIOUS
FRIGHTENED	GREAT	HAPPY	HORRIFIED

Did you notice that only SIX of the first 24 words describing human emotions are positive? Along the same lines, a psychologist who analyzed 558 words describing emotions in the English language found that two thirds of them were negative and only a third positive.

In another study cited by the Heaths a group of psychologists reviewed over 200 articles on various topics and found that bad has a considerably stronger pull over us than good. “People were shown photos of bad and good events spend longer viewing the bad ones. People pay closer attention to the bad stuff, reflect on it more, remember and weigh it more heavily in assessing a person overall. The pattern is so robust that researchers . . . have a label for it: positive-negative asymmetry.”

Still another researcher reviewed seventeen studies about how people across multiple domains and ages interpret and explain events in their lives. He found that “people were more likely to spontaneously bring up (and attempt to explain) negative events than positive ones.” Here were the researcher’s final words on his study. “When we began this review we anticipated finding some exceptions that would demarcate the limits of the phenomenon . . . *but we were unable to locate any significant spheres in which good was consistently stronger than bad*” (emphasis added).

Politicians and dictators have used our tendency toward the negative to advance their interests for centuries. They continue to do so today, without shame causing untold waste of human talent and economy. A nation is made strong by its people and the economy collectively produced by them. Effective leaders and managers understand that the productive and innovative spirits of people are far better focused and amplified through inspiration and challenge than they ever are by frightening them or stirring their pessimistic natures.

We are blessed to live in the greatest country on earth; whether measured by her natural resources, her human resources, or her capital resources. But the American experience is about far more than simply her wealth of resources. Since its founding, this country has demonstrated a spirit of independent thought that has shaped our institutions *for the people*, not over the people. The inseparable combination of statesmanlike leadership, a constitution founded upon Judeo-Christian principles, and free-enterprise capitalism together created a nation of people and wealth unparalleled in human history.

Pessimism did not inspire the first seagoing explorers to leave the safety of their known world behind in quest of the 'Shining New World.' It did not hold the early European colonists in bondage to their Old World poverty. Instead they risked everything to be able to freely invest their talents and energies in their own futures, instead of into the treasuries of the lords and masters they served.

Pessimism did not prevent 56 brave colonial representatives from affixing their signatures to the Declaration of Independence, an act of treason punishable by death at any moment until that day eight years later when Great Britain would sign the Treaty of Paris which recognized America as a sovereign nation and those brave leaders as Founding Fathers.

Pessimism still did not hold the pioneers of this raw new nation safely in their eastern homes and towns. Some with hopes of striking it rich and others simply yearning for wide open spaces and opportunities struck out for the western frontier to face harsh challenges and risks far more daunting than any they had faced in Europe.

Our young history is strewn with examples of optimism winning over pessimism, from slavery to freedom, inequality to equality, economic depression to the greatest economy on the face of the earth, to name but a few. America has never flinched to fight the war of good versus evil. While America's greatness lies with her people, leaders and government have played a significant role in inspiring greatness. WWII served as an unparalleled example of what American capitalism could accomplish when aligned with the impassioned will of her people to defeat the evil of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. The industrial might and productivity released by the combination of government, capitalism, and motivated workforce is unique in human history.

The space race with the Russians serves as a shining example of what is possible when government aligns with free market capitalism to do far greater things than either can accomplish alone. America's space program was just emerging from infancy when Russia announced it put a satellite into low space orbit. Worried that the Russians would gain an unchallenged strategic military foothold in space John Kennedy threw down the gauntlet for the government agency NASA and American industry to not only catch up, but to beat the Russians at this brand new race. Through dogged persistence and painful instruction from countless failures, America ultimately achieved her goal of putting men on the moon well before the Russians, achieving an important victory for national pride and a powerful statement of technological superiority.

Today we find ourselves buried in monumental problems of debt, deficit spending, growing government entitlements, growing strength among those nations that would harm us, slowing economies among our major trading partners, Europe and Asia, and all compounded by political and ideological gridlock in Washington. In their book, Chip and Dan Heath observe that big problems are rarely solved with commensurately big solutions. Rather, they are most often solved by a sequence of small solutions.

President Kennedy inspired a nation to put a man on the moon and the space industry went about the monumental task, not by immediately building a rocket to go to the moon, but by

sequentially solving problems with relatively small solutions. The wealth of knowledge from those 'relatively small' solutions spawned a host of new innovations including the LEDs, shoe inserts, cordless tools, scratch-less lenses, water filters, long-distance telecommunications, and satellite TV to name a few. [Click here for more](#). The exodus of scientists and problem solvers from the space program after the moon mission likely substantially seeded and fueled what would later become known as the Information Age or the 'Tech Bubble.' NASA accomplished its outsized mission without becoming an ever-growing organism sapping more and more taxpayer support. In fact it now struggles for survival.

There is no shortage of grand visions and challenges to rally our country around. Energy independence, sustainability over resource destruction, obesity and poverty, education, healthcare are but a few areas to coordinate government resources and private sector competition and innovation. America's greatest victories have been led by inspired men and women with enough courage to risk personal loss for the greater good.

We as a country face huge economic and security challenges. In November we will once again collectively vote our leaders into office. Will we base our votes on the 'lesser of two evils' or will we have a solutions-focus? Are we destined for another four years of status quo politics as usual, or will we get real change we can believe in?

Next week I'll get back to the economic grind. For now, suffice it to say that the weak recovery continues as supported by the numbers, but slowing global economies and ending stimulus cast doubt on sustainability.