

Barbarians At the Gates

I am not the first person to say this, but it bears repeating, and anyway I would like to get my thoughts clear on the subject. There is something at stake in the current political debate in the United States – something beyond individual policies, party positions, or even the philosophy of the size of government and its role in our lives – though it is, in a way, related to that. It is something of an underlying view of humanity – one which is the basis, I think, of many of our current divisions.

There has been a great deal of talk about transparency in government on one hand, and on the other have been statements, said with startling lack of embarrassment, that we will not really know what is in some large bills until they are passed and begin to be implemented. “We have to pass the bill so that you can find out what is in it,” Nancy Pelosi tells us, and at 906 pages, what choice do we have?

But that popular reading of the quote – politicians passing bills they don’t understand – doesn’t tell the whole story. In its entirety, the quote continues, “we have to pass the bill so that you can find out what is in it, away from the fog of the controversy.” It’s not an admission that politicians don’t know what is in the bill. It’s a declaration that ordinary voters can’t be trusted with that information because they are lost in a “fog of controversy.”

That this could be said, publicly, by a politician – said without people widening their eyes and beginning to speak of political suicide – is telling, because this is the philosophical center – how much involvement do we *really* want from the masses when it comes to governing? And below that, at its foundation, what do we *really* think about the masses themselves?

This is not a debate that is simply split down party lines, either, although some people would like to make it out to be. The amount of discomfort among some sections of the Republican Party about the Tea Party is evidence of that – who are these barbarians who are gathering at our gates, presuming to tell us how to run a civilized society – all the while eyeing our jobs, which we worked so hard to attain and secure?

When I was in college, I remember the sort of people who used the word “sheeple” and, even in this new millennium, could laugh at it as a clever pun instead of the worn-out cliché that it is – but I also remember the subtler people – those who would argue that people just didn’t know what they really needed. Not necessarily that they were stupid, of course, but... how easily snowed they were by culture, by political lies, by the politicians they thought represented them and by our very system of oppressive capitalism! With the implication, of course, that given all that, they might be just a *little* stupid. Perhaps uneducated would be the polite word, although their solution to this problem was rarely to educate them better. After all, we already have people with “better” educations; how much more efficient to simply let them make the decisions.

But, as one man (though probably not Abraham Lincoln) put it, “you can fool all the people some of the time and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time.” If it were true that people were being snowed, many are now looking at their government with renewed interest (and not a little suspicion). In spite of our frankly dreadful civic education in America these days, with prominent people forgetting the date of the Boston Tea Party or what is and is not included in the actual Constitution, it seems that a lot of people do remember the idea behind, if not the words of, an actual quote by Abraham Lincoln, not to mention the powerful ideal behind it: that Americans had a unifying ideal, and they were willing to give their lives “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

Either people must be free to choose the direction of their own lives, their own governance – to read bills if they want to, bills which are written as clearly and concisely as possible precisely so they can be read and understood – to debate those bills, where debate is seen as just as much of a democratic virtue as bipartisanship or compromise – either we will have this or we will have done no less than give up on American democracy.

A long time ago, there was a party called the Democratic-Republican Party. They believed that the government belonged to the people, not to any “patrons” whose wealth or education set them above their fellows. And they had their opponents, the Federalists, who believed, as John Jay (a founding father and the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court) put it, “Those who own the country ought to govern it.” The Federalists aren't around anymore.

The current political parties must learn a similar lesson. Whether it's those who own the country or those who simply, through the “virtue” of their education, think they know best how to run it, the division is the same. But a political party that has no use for the barbarians may find, in the end, that the barbarians have no use for it.