

CONSERVATIVES (WHA'ZAT? WHO'ZAT?) – HANGING TOGETHER?

Stephen L. Bakke – April 26, 2011

Here is Ben Franklin's famous warning at the signing of the Declaration of Independence:

We must, indeed, all hang together, or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately.



(In this illustration, I'm using the symbol of the "Grand Old Party" to symbolically represent the conservative movement in the United States. If you take objection to that editorial license ... too bad – 'tway 'tis!)

Ben's Message

Ol' Ben was implying something about the rebellious 13 British Colonies that eventually came together as the first of these United States. He was insinuating that progress and success in their revolution required a reasonable meeting of the minds and committed cooperation in a unified effort. The same applies to 2012 ... if one adds one more element - the need for a solid, conservative candidate.

There's a lot of talk these days that the conservatives aren't adequately defining the issues and are pulling apart on the basis of single issue, or "favorite" issue conservative philosophies. I recently heard something like: 'ya got yur' pro-lifers and social

conservatives over here, yur' big defense and border security fans over there, and then some more folks are squawkin' 'bout taxes right in yur' face! How's this supposed to work? What's all this about "hanging together"? How are we supposed to do that?

Where Have I Heard That Before?



A fluorescent light came on in my head ! Take a look at the illustration above. It shows a conservative elephant symbol balancing precariously on a "three legged" stool. And don't miss the noose around "Dumbo's" neck, or the cute reference about "hanging together." Those emphasize the delicate balance on the stool and the truly precarious position of political conservatives going into 2012 – if they don't approach the election in the right way.

What about that light that went on in my head? I recalled that Ronald Reagan, while our President, was faced with a similar problem, and addressed it in a clever but realistic way. He was facing numerous factions within conservative/republican circles. The three legged stool shown above is of his making. He spoke of a "three legged stool" that supports solid conservatism. To Reagan, these legs symbolize a strong national defense, strong free-market principles, and strong traditional social values. He understood and clearly stated that to remain upright, and not cause "Dumbo" unnecessary distress, the conservative cause must be supported by all three legs. One leg breaks and "Dumbo" is in deep "do-do"!

While researching this concept further, in order to get more current commentary on Reagan's theory, I found this from conservative Mark Lloyd:

What do you suppose holds together those three legs of the stool? The seat – and the seat, which is sustained by all three legs – a strong defense, the free market and traditional social values – is where we as Americans can rest steady The seat represents those certain unalienable rights granted by our creator, addressed in the Declaration of Independence and enumerated in the U.S. Constitution. The seat is our individual life, liberty and pursuit of happiness, bound together by faith in God and love of country."

Hang Together?

Evaluate for yourself whether you agree with this philosophy of doing our best to hang together in a common purpose unified effort. It is certainly impossible to get everyone on the same page of the hymnbook on every issue. However, to a certain extent the conservative cause will, in my opinion, be harmed if single issue ideologues take over defining the issues and, perhaps, picking the candidates.

Cartoonist Chuck Asay summed up this view humorously a couple years ago. Try to understand what he is representing, even if you disagree with his assignment of

personalities to the three legs. His point is well taken, and implies the importance of improvement in conservative unity. Here it is:



This is not to say we should try to be all things to all people – we lost the last election because of that approach. It’s really saying something quite different. While we all have our priorities, it is important to respect and support the right of various aspects of conservatism to be represented.

Conservatives in Training

Many of us like to describe ourselves as “conservative” but have we tried to “put on paper” what being conservative really means? More difficult yet would be to successfully, on a moments’ notice, clearly describe to a political adversary what being conservative means in terms of values and beliefs.

I admit to an embarrassing episode during which I stuttered and stammered about spending and deficits; about social programs and taxes; about security and defense; and about traditional values and American exceptionalism. Some raw material was there, but I lacked a clear and common thread of philosophy, and I had no simply stated metaphor for what I was talking about. Plus, I’m a better debater on paper, than face-to-face.

Let’s all go back to Reagan’s vision of the underpinnings of conservatism. His definition argues against single issue conservatives and let’s use that wisdom to build upon – not because we yearn for “yesteryear,” but because he happened to be right.

Progressive Arguments Against the Three Legged Stool

As I researched this topic, I came across some arguments for which conservatives should be prepared. Most of these objections are typically cynical and have to do with claims that the three legs are incongruent and impossible to achieve together. For example

- Strong defense is achieved only at the expense of social programs.
- A totally free market introduces an element of greed by which social programs suffer from the resulting inadequate funding.
- Free markets and strong defense programs are, by their nature, accomplished on the backs of the poor and middle class.

Of course it is necessary to balance priorities – especially when building coalitions. Never-the-less the weaknesses of these arguments have to do with the fact that they ignore what made America exceptional in terms of influence, strength, and economic accomplishments. America became great because of a tradition of individual freedom, incentive, and the possibility (not guarantee) of accomplishing much. The liberal/progressive cynicism is based in the theory that the poor and middle class only advance through individual handouts (social programs) and defaming the “rich.” That’s a discussion I have presented, and will present again “another day.” You get the picture!

**Then you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin' – Bob Dylan**

How true! As we assess what it means to be a conservative and how to bring success in 2012, we need to keep our eye on the three legs of that stool. But we need to be ever wary of what the relevant issues are for each election. The context in which national security, economic and social conservatism are considered, do change. For example:

Traditional Values and Social Issues – some elections may emphasize the pro-life debate; another may have Medicare, social security, other social programs, or defense of marriage as the “hot-buttons.” Or it may be all of those things. While protecting the issues you hold near and dear, also embrace those most relevant for the current election.

Strong Defense – may focus at times on border security, and at other times a conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan. Or both – and other issues as well. Remember that Reagan did not have to contemplate the immediacy of troops fighting overseas like we do. Our considerations will be different.

Economy – Obviously, these are now clear – we are dealing with, seemingly, ALL of the possibilities: unemployment, excess spending, deficits, national debt, regulations, energy, healthcare costs, housing crisis, “yada, yada”

No “leg” should be ignored or we will indeed be hanging VERY MUCH SEPARATELY!

I started this report to better answer, for myself, what are important conservative “underpinnings.” I created a baseline – Reagan’s approach – and a way of evaluating current issues and candidates and have provided a summary here. I hope you find these reminders helpful!