 **HALF A LOAF IS  
BETTER THAN NOTHING!**  
**(But you must start  
with a full loaf!)**



Stephen L. Bakke  June 26, 2012

*All government, indeed every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue, and every prudent act, is founded on compromise and barter.* – Edmund Burke

*Is gridlock a modern form of compromise?* – Stephano Bachovich, obscure (but wise) economics scholar



I often listen to a yearning for the “good old days” when compromise was the rule, not the exception. At least both sides tended to be on the same “mountain slope.” When a serious disagreement arose, the only thing needed was to decide where on that slope to settle. These days, the issues have progressed so far that a tipping point silently crept up on us in recent years, and now the antagonists are not even on the same side of that mountain. And it’s really not all their fault.

**No Longer Just “Shades of Grey”!**

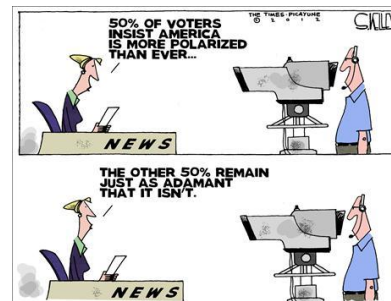
The passage of time has led to a different list of issues in our country – or at least different perspectives on the old issues. These differences are pesky and difficult, and not altogether certainties for solving. For example:

- Once there was general agreement that abortion wasn’t acceptable – they just needed to settle on the best way to prevent it. Now, the debate is between those who feel an abortion takes a life, and others who disagree with that and consider it a seminal issue of women’s rights regarding control over their bodies. What could possibly be the compromise there?
- Once there was majority agreement on the services that the government should provide – they just needed to compromise on the level of funding. Now there is a divide between conservatives who consider government is already too large, vs. liberals who feel government programs and intervention are important elements in development and prosperity. Those are two opinions which point in exactly opposite directions.
- An appropriate level of government spending and tax policies has always been a point of debate, but often they argued over amounts of increases or cuts. Some argue that the “gold standard” helped with this discipline. Now that government spending has risen to such a high level, the argument is no longer about “how much?” Conservatives are absolutely certain that spending should be lowered and taxes should be reformed in a way that would

they believe would stimulate the economy. Liberals are absolutely certain that more spending is necessary in the short run, and tax increases are also part of the solution. Those are opposite positions, not ones that have the potential for much compromise.

- Once there was a vast majority of citizens and politicians who were at least in the “same ballpark” on the role of the U.S. in the world – friends and enemies were easy to identify. All that was missing was a decision about how to help our friends, and when to punish our enemies. The debate is now between conservatives who believe the U.S. should be a proactive source of liberty in the world, while liberals are much more comfortable with viewing the U.S. as just another world citizen – with few specific leadership responsibilities.
- Consider the energy issues. Conservatives want to make full use of our natural petroleum resources and truly believe this is part of a pathway to prosperity and national security. Liberals believe that carbon fuel emissions lead us closer to catastrophe. If compromise is possible here it seems it will be merely maintaining the “status quo” – unless there is a major informational or technological break-through that is accepted by both groups.
- The biggest issue dealt with in the last couple of years is health care reform. Conservatives want to reform the health care system by using market forces. The liberal philosophy is to gradually move to a single payer system with the federal government directing and controlling all that goes on. Where’s the meaningful common ground in that scenario?

We no find that we no longer are negotiating about different shades of grey. Now we have to choose between black and white, it seems. And it’s not just “imagined black and white” – these are real differences! So much so that there is general agreement that “general agreement” is not possible. We are polarized more than at any other time in our history.



### **Compromise Requires Finding a Full Loaf**

The picture at the top shows a half loaf of bread. Compromise requires finding common ground, symbolized by a full loaf of bread. That loaf is divided so everyone gets something. In order to be an effective compromise, each party must gain something from the result, be able to brag about it, and provide some feeling of satisfaction. Hence the old saying, “better a half loaf than nothing at all!” But it’s getting harder and harder, sometimes impossible, to find that full loaf of bread to start with.

*Republicans and democrats must start compromising over how much we have to cut, not how much we want to spend.* – Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C.

Can’t you see how some things just don’t lend themselves to a dynamic of compromise? Can’t you see how, while not ideal, it’s OK? When basic philosophies differ so dramatically, what compromise can possibly result? What can we responsibly accept? Can’t we come to respectfully accept that? (I didn’t say we have to be happy about it and set aside our frustration!)

### **Is “Gridlock” Actually One Form of Compromise? (Think about it!)**

I agree that we are indeed polarized more than in the past, but I disagree with those who see room for compromise in all of these issues. I can’t believe their claim to have found that elusive “full loaf

of bread.” I tend to see some of these issues as truly coming from “different sides of the mountain.” The two sides really are facing different directions.

Accepting, and setting aside for the moment, the fact that certain of the opponents are insincere and even hypocritical, I truly believe that these antagonists (most of them) are absolutely sincere about the correctness of their position! Go through those issues listed (and others as well) and think about how you would craft a compromise. What would be the terms? How well would both sides accept your terms? And what would each of the opponents be able to “brag about”?

*The merits of compromise depend mightily on direction. If my wife and I agree on moving to Chicago, then the opportunities for compromise are limitless. When we move, where we live, when we get there, even how we get there – these are all reasonable subjects for negotiation. But if I want to move to Chicago and she wants to stay in Washington, D.C. then splitting the difference and moving to Cleveland would be absurd. But it would be a compromise. Right now, the two parties are split fundamentally on the issue of direction. – Jonah Goldberg*



I picture two parties facing the “abyss,” being told to “bridge the gap,” yet they both believe that doing so would be worse than staying where they are now. If that really is the opinion of many, then how can we fault them for it? In this graphic, picture them saying “we have done our best, that’s all we can do” and turning and walking down the steps in the opposite direction from the “gap.” That WAS the compromise, ladies and gentlemen, and we might as well get used to it! The solution now is for a party to seek to gain enough advantage so it doesn’t have to compromise. That’s today, but I truly believe that someday we will be able to once again work with each other on the same side of the “mountain.”

*[according to the Democrats] reasonable compromise amounts to acquiescing to the direction Obama and the Democrats want to go, but demanding concessions on how fast we get there and by what means ..... it is like saying Republicans must agree to let Obama drive the country off a cliff, but Democrats must be willing to negotiate how fast the car goes ..... the Democratic insistence that Republicans enter negotiations about how much more gasoline we should throw on the fire is a non-starter ..... – Jonah Goldberg*

*We’re recognizing that the only compromise that there is, is mine. – Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-NV.*

*The deadlock on the more consequential matters is a function of the conflict of visions. – Rich Lowry*