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The Republican Party & the ‘LUNATIC Right’

Not to be confused with an endorsement of the Democratic Party

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Back in the 1970s, I was routinely accused of being a member of the “lunatic left.” Perhaps my youthful idealistic enthusiasm for utopian political schemes justified the accusation. This charge referred to the belief that government ownership and control of all key economic institutions in service to the people would counter the negative effects of private for-profit ownership and address all socioeconomic problems. This position was largely theoretical and ideological and, over time, most on the left abandoned this extreme position in support of a mixed economy with a balance of market and government, or private and public sectors. The relevant models became the social democratic capitalist societies of Europe that have an expanded social welfare state and institutionalized labor protections such as Sweden, Finland and Denmark.

But it’s important to note that at no time was this extreme “lunatic left” in a position of political power in the U.S., or able to exert any significant influence on political-economic policy.

Today, unfortunately, the primary influence on our political-economic policies comes from what I call the “lunatic right.” Rather than viewing the market, or private sector, as a problem, the lunatic right holds that the government, or public sector, must be extinguished. And what’s most significant is that one of the two major parties responsible for governing the nation, in this case the Republican Party, has become a lunatic right party. Similar to the lunatic left, the lunatic right is driven by a rigid theoretical, ideological position, which precludes support for a practical, pragmatic approach that combines private ownership of production with a healthy and vibrant governmental public sector.

Imagine the absurdity and unacceptability of a demand that the private sector be reduced to the smallest size possible. The Republican Party essentially argues the obverse—that government should be reduced to the smallest size possible. Why is the former politically extreme and unacceptable, while the latter is mainstream Republican dogma? There is a simple answer—the anti-government position, albeit applied selectively (e.g., not for defense contracts), serves the class interests of the corporate elite. It’s no coincidence corporate executives are much more likely to be libertarian than socialist, or that the libertarian think-tanks shaping lunatic right

policy (Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute, American Enterprise Institute) are heavily funded by corporate interests.

While this is not the place to chart the Republican Party's march toward lunacy, it's only fair to note that the party was not always opposed to a mixed economy. The anti-government dogma is a relatively recent development that began with President Ronald Reagan, further deepened in the 1990s by Congressional Republicans, and moved steadily to the right under Tea Party leadership, resulting in the party purging any public official who dares speak in support of a government program, or suggests compromising with Democrats to enact legislation.

Many believe both parties are equally responsible for the political gridlock and paralysis in Washington. They might consult the analysis of mainstream political scientists Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein who, in *It's Even Worse Than It Looks*, conclude: "The Republican Party has become an insurgent outlier—ideologically extreme; contemptuous of the inherited social and economic regime; scornful of compromise; unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition."

The source of this dismal state of affairs is the coupling of ideological dogmatism with theological passion yielding the toxic brew appropriately labeled "market fundamentalism" or "neoliberalism"—a faith-based belief in the market as the exclusive sanctified solution to all social and economic problems, despite accumulated evidence to the contrary.

The resulting Republican lunacy has spawned many schemes, but let's consider one recent, representative manifestation—the effort to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act.

What does it say about a party that has proposed to undermine or repeal the Affordable Care Act at least 30 times that, when it's finally able to achieve its goal, has absolutely nothing to put in its place except empty, vague rhetoric about a "market-based" "patient-centered" system? This was followed by the hastily constructed American Health Care Act (AHCA) that, according to all estimates, would raise costs, endanger patients and increase the number of uninsured; that's zero for three on the presumed intended objectives of the repeal and replace. However, the repeal would have accomplished one clearly intended, but better-left-unspoken, purpose—providing a huge tax cut for the wealthiest Americans and the medical industrial complex.

The reason Republicans were so unprepared, and then developed a plan that would take us backwards, is because the issue for Republicans has never been about developing a comprehensive alternative plan to provide low-cost, quality healthcare to all citizens. Rather, it's about taking an ideological stand against any government effort, particularly one advanced by the other party (and thus labeled "Obamacare" for political gain), to address the healthcare crisis. They do not believe the government has any responsibility to regulate or subsidize healthcare, regardless of how it might benefit the population. In fact, the only significant Republican dissent to this bill came from the so-called Freedom Coalition, who wanted to move healthcare reform in an even more extreme right-wing direction, because they found the AHCA insufficiently generous to corporate interests, and insufficiently cruel to the most vulnerable.

The healthcare reform effort represents the standard operating extremism of the lunatic right.

For exhibit B, shift attention to the Trump cabinet appointments dedicated to furthering the extreme anti-government crusade or, in Bannon-speak, the “deconstruction of the administrative state.” In filling positions for that purpose, forget the quaint notion of merit or any relationship between assigned position and demonstrated knowledge. One can just imagine this headline in The Onion (a satirical news organization): “Former governor is appointed to head an agency he wanted to abolish but could not remember the name of,” a beautiful and creative exemplar of ironic absurdity. Unfortunately, the joke is on us. When irony becomes reality, you have lunacy. We may now be living in a post-irony world.

And that’s just the tip of the iceberg. There’s the Secretary of Education, whose primary credentials involve donating millions to Republicans and making a career out of promoting private, at the expense of public, education. Or a state Attorney General, who has dedicated his legal energies toward suing the Environmental Protection Agency, now appointed to head, and likely dismantle, that very agency. The fertile imagination of The Onion staff would be hard-pressed to invent such absurdity.

But make no mistake: This coalition of the unqualified is determined to opportunistically shape and advance a right-wing policy agenda of deregulation and privatization within the cognitive vacuum that is Donald Trump. The Trump Administration seems more than willing to advance the Republican Party agenda.

It’s unfortunate that a nation claiming to be a democracy offers citizens a choice between lunatic right Republicans and status-quo Democrats—neither party challenging the fundamental tenets of the bankrupt neoliberal model, and both beholden to and captured by corporate interests. Until we have a political system that gives working people some genuine party choices, and that removes money as the primary source of political influence, the United States will be a democracy in name only.