

Zooming to a better political world

Bruce Morlan

April 7, 2020

The coronavirus pandemic is changing the very language we are using to discuss systemic population-based issues. Much of our discussion is about the negatives, but there are a couple of sliver linings even in such a crisis.

The first one is that we will come out of this with a large cohort of people who have actually spent a lot of time talking about the trade-off between being WITTs (We're In This Together) — the poorly labeled “social justice” people, and being YOYOs (“You're On Your Own”) — the rugged individualists who don't take well to a powerful central authority. These thought leaders will dominate much of our political conversations going forward.

For one example, the discussions about health care (which are most notably NOT about the ACA). Many of these conversations will point to the pandemic to create demand for new programs and shared solutions (fodder for the WITTs). An important second example is that of guaranteed income. While some on the right have argued for a form of Universal Basic Income based on the fight for liberty (notably, the well known Libertarian think tank, the Cato Institute, funded by among others the infamous Koch brothers), the left has been slow to the table — preferring instead to create targeted programs that create politically useful “us vs. them” battle fields. In that context, the question of the national debt has long been pushed to the back of the bus — remember 2008 and the Tea Party? Now, we may see a new push to redefine how we look at that debt in the context of the stimulus packages coming down the political supply chains. In particular, how we can keep in mind the real taxpayers (the middle segment of our population — those who lack the organization to fight for their freedom from that debt), but who also lack the resources to avoid having to pay it off.

How these and other political issues will be played out will be changed by this pandemic — just as the World War II arguments over aircraft carriers and battleships was decisively settled by the Battle of Midway (by the way, two great movies are out there on this topic, if you need something to do while sheltering in place). So this is the first sea change in our political world.

But almost as important — and it will be interesting to see if this can survive the pandemic — is that we are suddenly confronted with a political world that for this part of the cycle (nomination fights) cannot use the rant and chant tactics first developed in the 1960s, as described in the Saul Alinsky book, “Rules for Radicals.”

Although usually thought of as rules for leftist activists, it is often pointed to by activists on the right as a sort of “it worked for them, let's try it ourselves.” Consider one of the rules from that treatise, to wit, “A good tactic is one your people enjoy.” Anyone who watches massive street protests quickly realizes that the street theater, the ranting and chanting, and the sense of

community they produce is reminiscent of the rallies in parking lots known as tailgating and are much more about building community than generating solutions. Anyone watching a press conference knows that the real audience is seldom the press in the room, but rather the crowds in the parking lots.

Now, our politicians are unable to use the excitement of the political rally, and are reduced to more reasoned presentations. One local aspirant to serve as the Congressional District 2 Representative (Erika Cashin, a Republican) is notably using the face-to-face online tool, Zoom, to create intimate and informative interactive events, unencumbered by the usual need to deliver those applause lines sometimes called “red meat for the base.”

Policy wonks love this retreat to rationality — but the rant-and-chant crowd may find it unsettling to actually have to hear opposing views and not just engage in those shout-downs called “the heckler’s veto.”

In 2018 I wrote a column about the illiberal arts colleges in Northfield. At about that time the students at St Olaf heard from a guest lecturer about how the confrontational politics of the liberal colleges were destroying the very institutions that they were attending. For now, at least, we are being granted more access to real policy thinking thanks in part to one of the humblest of nature’s creatures — one not even alive in the usual use of the word — an RNA-based virus.

The pandemic has certainly taken away the power of the crowds as we all turn to face this common foe. It is up to us to ensure that we do not slip back to the confrontational politics that threatened to destroy our body politic.