

On the Left: Blame problems on radical conservatism

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A conservative friend recently sidled up to me over coffee. “Jack, I’m really distressed about Washington. Can’t we do anything? It’s all about attack and counterattack. What’s wrong?”

“Radical conservatism,” I replied.

A puzzled look crossed his face. You see, he probably wanted me to say, “radical liberalism.” Liberals are, in the Fox/Limbaugh view, cowards, feckless, too soft (yet ruthless), haters, open-border fanatics, and socialists who want – heck, fervently desire – to make the U.S. into Venezuela. Oh, sure.

We duelled for a few minutes until stalemate was reached over human-caused global warming when we both gave up due to the inexplicable ignorance of the other.

But it was a good question. What’s made our government a helpless giant and discredited worldwide?

Let me respond by recalling the history of how we got here. The short answer is still “radical conservatism.” Yes, yes, I know the Democrats now have four members who are some shade of “radical socialist,” but only four. This is the response after 20 years of radical conservatism.

America settled on a liberal consensus in the 1950s. Dwight D. Eisenhower agreed with unions! Richard M. Nixon protected spotted owls, forced business to stop polluting, and – horror – had the Feds invade the workplace searching for unsafe conditions. Unforgivable! Where’re those things in the Constitution? Socialism!

A strong reaction was required to return America to its golden years of the 1890s and 1920s. Lewis Powell, soon to be sent to the Supreme Court, wrote a call-to-arms to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in 1971 to rise in political revolt. “Strength,” Powell wrote, “lies in . . . consistency of action *over an indefinite period of years*, in the scale of *financing* available through joint effort . . .”

The business community, united with Southerners furious by school integration, swung into action. The Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, the Federalist Society, the Chamber of Commerce National Litigation Center were all funded by our rich elites using the Koch, Scaife, Bradley, Olin and Castle Rock Foundations. War!

At the same time the Goldwater Republicans were forming, dedicated to a bare-bones government and mobilizing a new Republican base.

It was Nixon who saw how powerful the political right would be if joined by the white Solid South. Join up, Southern Democrats, he enjoined; Abraham Lincoln died a long time ago. So the Southerners joined the Republican Party and forced out the moderates from the Northeast. Radical conservatism followed.

1995 was pivotal. That's when the Koch brothers decided to take over the Republican Party with their billions. That's also when Roger Ailes hatched Fox News to be the Republican Party megaphone.

Karl Rove, noticing how elections could be lost if your base simply stayed home (that's how Trump was elected), decided that the road to power was to inflame the base emotionally so they would vote consistently. Newt Gingrich agreed.

Yes, war. And, as in all wars, compromise was weakness and your enemies had to be dehumanized. Liberals, were, well, see above. Civil war "fought with a scale and a duration and a savagery that is only true of civil wars" as Gingrich growled.

Gingrich closed down the government, threatened the international standing of the dollar, impeached the president and generally refused to compromise or use civility in his scorched-earth actions. His PAC admonished Republicans to "learn to talk like Newt." They did.

And so we're living with the result – a president that bullies by insult, dehumanizes his opponents, energizes the Solid South with his racism, launches cannonades against the government and presides over a new Gilded Age of the rich.

So, Newt, civil war hot enough for you? Base inflamed enough, Karl?

It took 50 years. And since I can't recall what I had for breakfast this morning, I don't blame people of good will for forgetting the genesis of it all. The fact that the Democrats are finally getting radical – all four of them – is understandable.

But if you wonder who done it, don't look to the left.