

Searching for Culture Battles Instead of Solvency

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Last week, I didn't do any political writing... or reading, for that matter. I was on a fun multi-state road trip with my family, and I've been told that reading or writing while driving isn't particularly safe.

I did however *listen* to few political podcasts in the car. I should mention that the rest of my family was mercifully spared from them, thanks to their wise decision to pack earphones. One of those podcasts was by The Dispatch; Scott Lincicome from the CATO Institute was a guest.

Lincicome discussed a column he'd just written (I later checked it out) about the recently signed-into-law American Rescue Plan (ARP), President Biden's \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 "recovery" package. As I wrote in a piece a couple weeks ago, that staggering price-tag includes a lot of funding for things that have little or nothing to do with the health crisis the legislation is supposed to address. Lincicome gets into much more detail than I did, and his piece is very much worth your time.

But there was a separate point he made that I also found compelling, hinted at in the column's headline: "While You Were Seussing."

"Ever since Republicans lost Georgia (thrice), Biden was due some sort of big, pandemic-related legislative win (victors and spoils and all that). In fact, the most striking thing about the last few weeks hasn't been Biden's ARP victory or his gloating but the fact that, while the votes were being cast and even now, Republican Party opposition has barely registered—especially among the grassroots.

Instead, the biggest priority in right-leaning political circles in the days surrounding the bill's passage wasn't the numerous areas for Republican or conservative disagreement about the ARP's many, many non-pandemic measures or its potential economic implications, but the decision by Dr. Seuss Enterprises to cease publication and licensing of six books that, in their view, contained 'hurtful and wrong' imagery."

Lincicome is right. Though there was some public push-back from congressional Republicans to the package, including opposition with their votes, it was pretty dispassionate. The same was true among the right-wing media, and remarkably the Republican base. In fact, polls showed that most Republicans actually *supported* the ARP in all its \$1.9 trillion glory.

That's quite a change from the start of the Obama presidency, when federal stimulus spending that was small in comparison to the ARP (when our national debt was also much smaller) spawned the fiscally-conservative Tea Party movement that led to a huge electoral comeback for the GOP a year and a half later. With that passion came real political change, and though it often

wasn't pretty, the GOP did manage to block a lot of additional spending that Obama and the Democrats very much wanted.

But today, there's almost no passion for fiscal solvency, even as our national debt races quickly toward \$29 trillion. Instead, knee-jerk culture battles are all the political right largely seems to care about, as evidenced by the amount of time and emotion Republican politicians, Fox News pundits, and the Republican base invested in the Dr. Seuss story.

Most of them saw it as the latest — and a particularly egregious — chapter in the *cancel culture* (which is indeed a real thing and should be confronted). But the Seuss stuff simply wasn't a serious example of that culture.

The situation wasn't like Amazon's decision to stop selling Ryan T. Anderson's book because they found his views on transgender issues to be offensive. In this case, it was the Dr. Seuss estate that made the decision to stop publishing six of their *own* books. They did so because they no longer felt comfortable with some decades-old ethnic imagery inside them.

One could argue that the organization was compelled by politically correct sensibilities, but so what? The books are *their* property. They weren't victims of oppression or cancellation.

Yet, political righties decided a huge cultural injustice has been committed. They were in an uproar on Fox News, talk radio, and social media. House minority leader Kevin McCarthy inexplicably read "Green Eggs and Ham" in an online video. Ted Cruz embraced the branding of the GOP as the party of Dr. Seuss. People raced to their computers to order copies of Dr. Seuss's remaining titles. Soon, 15 of the top 20 best-selling books on Amazon were by Dr. Seuss.

In other words, in an effort to stand up to the cancel culture, the political right created a big sales surge that *rewarded* the Dr. Seuss estate for self-cancelling, which also rewarded Amazon (a company that actually *is* contributing to the cancel culture).

This is what American conservatism and the Republican party have been reduced to in the year 2021. Principled stances are reserved for reactionary outrage, and few in a position of leadership are even bothering to try and make a persuasive, policy-oriented case to the public... for anything.

Yes, part of this is due to the GOP largely abandoning its platform for Donald Trump, who wasn't particularly interested in policy or ideology, but loved stoking grievance among the base and fighting culture battles (rhetorically anyway). It was an easy thing to do, and Trump's supporters loved it, but it set the bar *very* low for any measure of political achievement. I'm afraid the remaining allure of Trumpism will keep it there for the foreseeable future, and that's not a good thing for the country.

Still, there's always somewhat of an identity crisis and a period of being lost in the wilderness for a major political party after it's lost big in an election. Maybe the GOP will discover or rediscover some defining principles, and find its way forward sooner than I'm thinking. It sure would be nice, because our nation has very real and consequential challenges that the Democrats are ideologically opposed to confronting or even acknowledging. Fiscal solvency is at the top of that list.

The Cat in the Hat can't address such a problem, but a serious opposition party would at least stand a chance. I hope one emerges.