

# The High Ground



**Libertarian Press, Inc.**

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Once again the candidates for high political office have moved to center stage; they are putting on airs and pontificating with solemn promises, pledges, and assurances. All the while they are loudly and harshly rebuking and chastising each other, as politicians usually do in an election year, they are actually discussing the functions of government itself. Some would cure the evils of the world through more political action and government intervention; others would reject such remedies as futile and even harmful; and still others are seeking compromises between these two basic positions.

The activists have been the moving force throughout much of this century. They provided the motivation and argumentation for fundamental social and economic changes. The form of government we have today and the policies conducted by all levels of it are the products of their intellectual efforts and influence.

The extraordinary success of these politicians flows from two basic stratagems: they offer instant relief from all suffering, real or imagined, posturing as saints and benefactors with ready solutions in their pockets for making all things right. They wage war on poverty, war on disease, war on crime, war on drugs, etc. etc. Occupying the high ground of concern for their fellow men, *their fountainhead of strength is human frailty and failure; the banner under which they conquer is compassion.*

The second stratagem builds on the first. Since politics is their cure-all for human problems, but does not generate

any means for solving them, the activists labor diligently to forge and politicize interest groups to appropriate the necessary means by legislative force. They invariably launch special interest wars, fanning flames of discontent, envy, covetousness, hatred, and anger. At this point, *they descend from their high ground of human concern, and, stooping to a low level of irresponsibility and immorality, they deal destruction to any peaceful social cooperation. The hatred, mistrust, envy, and anger they sow inevitably breed vice and crime.*

On election day, both compassion and anger are marketable commodities that usually sweep their champions into high political office. Arrayed against all forms of suffering, they may wax eloquent about the impoverished conditions of some members of society and simultaneously point out the affluence of others. They may alternately shed tears for their fellow men who are abjectly poor, suffering hunger and want due to misfortune, and act outraged about the conspicuous consumption by the rich and famous. They may orate on the Judeo-Christian ideal of brotherhood that makes every man his brother's keeper, but then wallow in envy and covetousness. In short, they are political Jekylls and Hydes with quasi-schizophrenic phases of kindness and cruelty.

There is much disagreement among the Jekylls and Hydes of politics. They disagree on their concern for the needy as well as their anger against the wealthy. One may prefer an allocation of funds to

elderly members of society rather than to the younger poor and needy, or he may opt for more aid for higher education, or for infant health care rather than for foreign aid. All candidates promise their constituents bigger slices of the transfer pie. Some may want to extract the necessary means from corporations, other from wealthy individuals, while yet others may prefer deficit spending. No matter how furious and derisive the debate, all interventionists are really kindred souls in philosophy and policy.

Few critics challenge them on ideological and moral grounds. Most objectors who raise their voices against a particular transfer scheme give purely economic reasons. Pointing at empty treasuries and insufficient revenue, they merely mumble: "We cannot afford it." Unfortunately, such an objection carries little weight in the political arena; it merely leads to tedious discussions of fiscal notions and theories. In fact, the empty-pocket argument cannot ring true in view of so much private and public wealth and conspicuous consumption. It is rejected summarily by many Americans whose focus is on human deprivation and instant remedies.

Throughout the 1980s, a few economists frequently cited the empty-pocket argument to regain control over government spending and to balance the federal budget. They argued for a leaner, better-integrated, more-streamlined federal government, allocating resources with greater efficiency. "Unnecessary programs are no longer affordable," they warned. At times they even cited history: "Until the Great De-

pression of the 1930s, the federal budget was kept in balance or even ran surpluses as a matter of course." Yet all such arguments proved to be rather fruitless because the spenders seemed to occupy the high ground of social concern and political morality. Pleading for neighborly concern, for compassion and love, and making fun of the affordability Scrooges, the spenders prevailed every time. In due time, federal allocations were increased for retirement and disability programs, unemployment compensation, housing assistance, food stamps, child support, low-income energy assistance, and a myriad of similar spending programs. In short, while the economists were waxing eloquent about efficiency and affordability, federal spending soared from some \$590 billion in 1980 to more than \$1.5 trillion in 1992.

*To confront and repel the spenders is to challenge them on moral grounds. Their posturing as saints and benefactors must be exposed as a crude deceit which, of all the evils in politics, is the most dangerous. Their fountainhead of strength must be unmasked as naked selfishness and their banner as a battle flag for social strife and economic destruction.* They are unwaveringly materialistic, ignoring the spiritual, religious, and intellectual needs of man. Their trust in government actually steers people away from the only real solution: individual concern, love, and charity. Seeking to politicize and alienate group after group, beginning with labor and working their way through racial minorities, ethnics, feminists, and even the very young,

while encouraging militancy at every turn, is to discourage their followers from ever relying on their own ability, ingenuity, and strength. To ignite and fuel such destructive impulses of man as envy, covetousness, and even anger is to prepare a powder keg of social upheaval.

It is no coincidence that crime has been on the increase ever since the rise of political militancy. Year after year, the number of crimes reported continues to increase. From 1964, when the Great Society was inaugurated, to 1980, the property crime rate rose nearly 2.5 times; the rate of violent crime even tripled. The American Bar Association estimates that more than 30 million serious crimes are perpetrated every year—which is 2.5 times the reported numbers. One of every 12.5 serious crimes committed may lead to an arrest and only one of 58 is punished by imprisonment. In other words, for every 1,000 major felonies, only 17 criminals are confined temporarily to comfortable prison quarters.

Most politicians pay scant attention to the suffering inflicted by crime. Blinded by their own advocacy of discontent and resentment, they may even argue that such crimes are unavoidable, that the criminals are only doing what society drives them to do under such hateful conditions, and that the victims of discrimination and exploitation are merely striking back at the discriminators and exploiters.

There cannot be any doubt that doctrines of anger, together with government's cure-all policies, contributed significantly

to the exploding crime rate of recent decades. The multiplication of programs designed to correct discrimination and exploitation actually increased the incentives for criminal irresponsibility. The massive expense of the programs tended to exhaust the resources that could otherwise have been used toward the proper function of government. After all, government is supposed to defend its people from foreign aggressors and domestic peacebreakers, to punish fraud and violence, to organize courts and sit in judgment of disputes. The soaring crime rate is a clear indication that our government is either unwilling or unable to safeguard the social order which it is supposed to preserve.

*There is little hope that the trend can be reversed as long as we remain infatuated with the god of politics.* We must turn our backs on all demagogues, no matter what color or party. We must refuse to fund them and their parties, and decline to finance their elections. Fueled by too much money, campaigns merely compel politicians to advocate ever more government cures, and make more foolish promises. If the funds now donated to politicians were instead given to private and religious charities, they could work wonders healing wounds and alleviating many forms of human suffering.

This is not to suggest that we should forever renounce politics and disassociate from all politicians. On the contrary, we should always be aware of who the scoundrels, hypocrites, and demagogues are,

and cast our votes against them. After all, as voters, we hold a public trust as surely as any public official; but this trust becomes rather onerous and, in the end, difficult to honor if we are forced to choose only between different degrees of evil. Who is to get my vote if my choice is between a racist and a class warrior; between a transfermonger and an economic warmonger?

To reject the demigods of politics is not to abandon our fellow men in need. We must materially and spiritually care for the poor and sick, for addicts and alcoholics; we must support kindergartens, schools, colleges, and seminaries; create job opportunities for the unemployed, and comfort those in trouble and distress. We may do so individually or through church and synagogue charities which, without the high overhead of government bureaucracy, offer relief of every kind of distress.

Lasting changes in government are the result of changes in moral standards. To restore social peace and economic prosperity, we must abandon politics—the god that fails and disappoints. We must reprove error, confute vice, and expose the hypocrisy of politicians. Above all, we must return to the high ground of morality. In the words of George Washington, “If to please the people, we offer what we ourselves disapprove, how can we afterward defend our work? Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair. The rest is in the hands of God.”



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