

2 PM - 1920s On politics and post WWI Modernism

“While we are waiting for the congressman to arrive, explain what you meant when you compared today with the 1920s.”

“In the 1920s, reeling from the war, people were primed to be led astray by smooth-talking idealists and academic hoodoo. Karl Marx had undermined class, Darwin had undermined the historical foundations of religion, and Freud had established that sex unconsciously challenged reason as a driving force. Public imagination was prepared to run away with any half-plausible conjecture.”

“Why more so then than at other times?”

“Communication had begun to penetrate the farthest reaches of society. By the 1920, automated typesetting invented before the turn of the century put cheap, popular books and magazines in the hands of almost everyone. Radio, press, and other public communication arts made sure there was no escape from unproven conjectures. In a bubbling soup of social uncertainty, any number of ‘-isms’ could rationalize tearing down society and not offer a viable, practical alternative to rebuild it again. In that environment, Virginia Woolf made a sweeping statement repeated in the early 1920s, “On or about December 1910 human nature changed.”

“What changed?”

“She alluded to change in human relationships and conduct in religion, politics and literature. Observers watched in horror as society, with technology’s foot on the accelerator, accelerated toward meaninglessness and destruction. In *Metamorphosis*, Kafka’s character metamorphosed into a cockroach. Conrad’s Colonel Kurtz embraced situational ethics. Nabokov’s characters relished their madness. In Joyce, cities crumbled and in Kipling, empires did. Throughout the rusting of characters, the form of

literature rusted its way toward Post-modern self-conscious self-reference.

“Woolf described ‘Modernism’ as an artistic intent to push deeper into the literary representations of consciousness. Examples included James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*. If character is the question of life, should it also be the question of literature? Should characterization of characters mirror character in life?”

“By characterization of character do you mean descriptions of characters?”

“Polished plots and witty characterizations of the day were superficial, and unrepresentative of significant issues. If literature was supposed to help to bring to conscious awareness how people thought and chose to act, it had failed to accomplish its task. If characterizations, by their example, were to show readers how to behave, or show the consequences of bad behavior, they were singularly unsuccessful.”

“How we look at character has changed over time.”

“As P. J. O’Rourke explained, referring to Richard Brookhiser’s biography of *George Washington, Founding Father*, ‘We worry about our authenticity—about whether our presentation reflects who we “really” are. Eighteenth century Americans attended more to the outside story and were less avid to drive putty knives between the outer and inner man. “Character” . . . was a role one played until one became it; “character” also meant how one’s role was judged by others. It was both the performance and the reviews. Every man had a character to maintain; every man was a character actor.’ It’s as if in the 18th and 19th century we were learning about ourselves. To Woolf’s point, early in the 20th century we still hadn’t learned how to write about ourselves.”

“Haven’t we always been able to write about ourselves?”

“Early philosophers did not have refined words to write about themselves. Aristotle could not express character, but his intellectual virtues encouraged character. Character is not about demonstrating virtues, but about validating the internal processes that deduce virtues. My wife explains, ‘Well, I don’t love to iron;

I love to have things ironed.' The example differentiates between the process and the result. People love the result we call virtues much like they love pressed clothes. They don't care to do the slogging that will get them pressed. To them, admiring pressed clothes is quite enough to get them all pressed. That would sound like a joke if it weren't an accurate analogy."

"You can talk about something, want something, and not understand the thing you want."

"That's the point. Woolf's novels tried to represent how uncertain and complicated thinking and consciousness are. They did not advocate a process by which an individual could develop mastery of character in oneself or society. Joyce and Woolf describe consciousness at work. Their Modernism does not address how individuals gain their society. As Woolf represents consciousness, she does not address constructive use of consciousness. Consciousness is not character but the mechanism by which character can happen. Literature like Woolf's can describe your despair, but great literature should suggest a way out.

"Herman Hesse, in *Siddhartha*, tried to reach for a new level of understanding—of 'consciousness' as the word was then understood, but almost in the way that people of the 1920s were pursuing the occult. Hesse reached for knowing, without knowing where to reach, just as Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* pursued unknown and unknowable consciousness. 'Ooh!' and 'Ahh!' in the same breath as 'Huh? What's the point?'

"In its superficiality, literature can either be shallow or a sign of its times—needing an 'Ah! Ha!' of awareness or revelation. It's not that they can't think a certain way, but that they don't, absent the desire, the practice, or the incentive.

"Take away from the 1920s that lessons need to be remanufactured in each generation to endure. If not revalidated, they become hollow clichés. The last generation of the 20th century has yet to recover those lessons.

"The 1920s were also when the basics of economics were forgotten. What we learn about Adam Smith in many

introductory economics courses isn't the essential Smith we need to know to pull the lever in a voting machine. Smith didn't discuss what we ought to do, he warned us of things that never worked and never will."

"The best advice is to mistrust and verify any utterance by any official and any credentialed moron."

...

"The congressman is here to see you."

"Thank you. . . . Welcome back from Washington."

"Thank you. Let me get to the point. As an elected representative I'm trying to represent this community and you're killing me!"

"How so?"

"Writing all those negative editorials about me."

"The editorials speak to your positions, not you. While ignorance is no barrier to elected office, remaining ignorant after an election is a disservice to those you serve, to your country, and to yourself. We offer the opportunity to consider quality advice and you fail to recognize the favor."

"You criticize me when I am trying to get stuff for my constituents."

"Get stuff for your constituents? Is that what the voters in your district elected you to do?"

"Darn right they did. I represent them and get as much for the district as I can."

"Phooey! You weren't elected to 'get stuff.' You weren't elected to mirror voters' popular wishes. You weren't elected so your party can rule. You weren't elected to exercise majority muscle."

"I was elected to do all of those."

"You were hired to think—to sort through, sift out, synthesize, and understand. You were hired to learn enough to make sound decisions and to help constituents understand why the reasoning behind those decisions is sound. You were hired to *deliberate*."

“Practical politics is learning to work the levers of government.”

“You think your job is to bribe your constituents using money from their own wallets, so you can keep your job, so you can soak more money from those constituents to piss away. You have crooks for colleagues and wash your hands of responsibility for calling them out. You know they are crooks and you tolerate their misbehavior.”

“I have to work with them. I don’t control them.”

“You have a voice you are afraid to use to label their behavior. Your brain sees a pattern of misbehavior but you won’t speak out against it to pin their behavior down and let them squirm.”

“That’s the way things work in Washington.”

“That’s the way things *don’t* work in Washington. You are a nice enough person, yet ill-equipped to be a congressman because you dare not stand up against patterns of misbehavior. If you are resolute in principle, who knows, some other member of congress may admire and try to emulate how you act. Others may follow until the Augean stables actually come clean. If not, at least you will come home with your character and your reputation intact.”

“You second guess the voters. I won the popular vote.”

“Popular vote is no excuse for doing an unacceptable job. Does that vote outweigh the social consequences of tolerating misbehavior? Does the vote that gives you the power to meddle give you the necessity?”

“You don’t expect an answer.”

“No, but I expect you to think deeper than you do. People think less and act emotionally. You owe your constituency more. You owe them your best intellectual effort and your best character. What you tolerate litters your legacy with unintended consequences, over-centralized government, ineffective laws, opaque administration, special privilege, and rent seeking.”

“What would you have me do?”

“First of all, learn from history not to embrace what has never worked and never will. Second, understand the large forces of history.”

“And you think you know them better at home in Rome than I do in Washington?”

“If you understood the economic forces at work you’d be reading about them, speaking about them, and acting on them. This is not new. In the middle 1800s, Dickens wrote about the stressful transition to industrialism in Britain. English novels have always dealt with mankind’s relationship with the community around them. Industrialization occurred at different times in different countries, but in America industrialization began after the revolutionary war, was affected by westward expansion and Andrew Carnegie, and changed again after Henry Ford.”

“That’s common knowledge. Why are you telling me?”

“Large waves of history are commonly overlooked. In 1875, 75 percent of Americans earned their living working on farms. By 1925 the percentage reversed with 75 percent of households earning their living in the cities. Technology brought about cataclysmic social change with stunning consequences whose evidence is fixed permanently in the literature of the day.”

“But why does that matter?”

“We are in the midst of another cataclysmic social change brought about by technology. If you overlook the change washing over us, you risk imposing more problems than you solve. In 1975, 75 percent of Americans worked in manufacturing or retail to bring dollars into their households. By 2025, we can expect 75 percent of Americans will work in the service sector, pushing information, or at something new we have yet to dream. The change from manufacturing to service is every bit as cataclysmic as the transition from agriculture to manufacturing. Our political class is not engaged to manage the transition. And that, my friend, includes you.”

“I’ve been working to help those in economic distress.”

“You’ve promoted European social programs that never worked there, as if Europe, simply being Europe, had something special

to offer. Our forebears fled to escape Europe for good reason. What makes something European worthwhile? If Europe outlaws guns should America do the same? Guns have done damage and guns have stopped damage from being done. The problem isn't that we're right and they are wrong, but how do you solve that misused guns cause some problems and the absence of protection causes others?"

"I respect your opinion."

"The hell you do! You're not even willing to consider it. You will not put it to the test. You are afraid to challenge your opinion because it is yours, and your ego is bound up with it being right. You pay lip service to those in need . . ."

"We care for them."

"You care so much that you are willing to steal other people's money to 'help' them?"

"It's charity."

"Charity is a donation of your own money. You steal."

"It's not stealing."

"It is stealing if you take by threat of force something that belongs to someone else. It's worthwhile to tie yourself to others, but not to rope someone else to do your bidding."

"But it's to help someone in need."

"Charity is individual, voluntary, and important. Help requires one to work to solve a problem, not use it as a pretext to collect power while you kick the real problem ahead to the next administration and keep those who need help beholden to you. You want to pay them off to get them out of your sight for a month and buy their vote along the way. You care for yourself. As Francis Bacon said, 'Laws are made to guard the rights of people, not to feed the lawyers.' The state does not exist to cheat people. You don't govern to minimize unintended consequences; you govern to get re-elected. For instance, you accept financial support from unions outside your district, don't you?"

"Unions have every right to participate in the political process."

"A union PAC is an artificial corporation, designed to centralize political weight that should be treated as any other business corporation. At issue are consistency, transparency, accountability, and resistance to abuse. What is the purpose of a union?"

"To advocate on the behalf of workers."

"You believe that people should be miss-employed and protected."

"Certainly not."

"Then why do you support featherbedding? Your policy makes a passenger ticket unnecessarily more expensive for everyone else. Might as well pay one person to dig a ditch and another to fill it in. If union worker A is an unnecessary worker like a fireman on a diesel train, and the union lobbies to preserve that job, does that position work to the benefit of union workers B and C at the same company?"

"That's a trick question."

"Not at all. The company forced to unnecessarily pay worker A is less profitable and less able to pay B and C higher wages."

"Jobs are why I vote the way I do."

"What kind of jobs? You are like the cartoon character in the locomotive who, needing the engine to travel faster, grabs the needle on the speedometer gauge to pull it higher. That's funny to watch in a cartoon, but in real life, it's an appeal to magic, not science. So badly do you want the gauge to read higher, that you are willing to support make-work."

"Jobs available should be decided by individual choice that creates legitimate demand, not by agonizingly inefficient centralized planning. You don't care about the economy. You care about the numbers. You won't admit to yourself that it won't work. You'd steal velocity from the economic engine with artificial government jobs to pump numbers for your next campaign brochure. What's the difference between that and

cheating on a test? When you cheat on a test, you're the one who doesn't learn."

"I want good jobs. Preserving jobs is important."

"What is a job? Is a job a conduit for welfare payments or is a job an attempt to match people up to work in demand where they can fulfill their greatest potential? Should we reward people who cheat other employees with their incompetence?"

"No."

"Yet if we let them go, they win the unemployment lottery at my expense. Should we preserve make-work or real jobs?"

"Real jobs."

"Then those who want only to 'preserve jobs' pay only lip service to the jobs we want and, instead, set a false goal just to buy votes."

"What would be a better goal?"

"Gross Domestic Product is the measure of wealth generated. GDP peaks when all people work efficiently to create goods and services that other people want to buy."

"How do you get everyone to work like that?"

"Not the way most unions and politicians work to impose a static world. The rest of us have to live in a dynamic one. A union that couldn't guarantee members' jobs should see that those who have jobs are well-trained for them, and retrained for different jobs if their current job no longer lets them work at capacity to do work that needs to be done."

"But income inequality is excessive."

"Inequality is a smaller problem than your mechanism for correcting it. You do nothing to solve the problem if you break the economic engine, destroy incentive, cheapen education, and damage quality of life for everyone else. Something broken by government cannot be fixed by piling on additional burdens with unintended consequences that break it further."

"The poor deserve more than they are getting."

"Who put you in charge of social engineering? Who put you in charge of coercion? Who put you in charge of stealing resources to do it? Who put you in charge of enforcing results? You throw grit into the engine of the economy our parents built to earn the quality of life that empowered you to piss it away."

"Too many aren't paid enough for their work."

"You presume they are working."

"Well, there aren't enough high paying jobs for them to do, so some are not working and the rest are not paid well enough."

"So you presume they should do something for their 'entitlement'?"

"Yes."

"Then I should be working, too? I'm a journalist with few journalist jobs around today. If I can't find a job as a journalist, should I be paid to sit around because no job fits my immediate skill set?"

"No. You might have to take a different kind of job."

"Well, if this area happens to be depressed such that no jobs are available nearby, should I then be paid to sit around and do nothing? If there are jobs in the next town or in the next state, should I be paid to sit around?"

"That's a hard question. I don't want to break up families."

"Paying someone to sit around doesn't enhance one's job skills. Whose money do you propose to use to pay someone to do nothing—other people's money?"

"Money from taxes."

"Money from taxes is other people's money. You voted for a luxury tax. Who suffers under a luxury tax?"

"The rich."

"Not really. Other working people suffer: the boat builder, the deck hand, the maker of boat bumpers, the galley chef, the craftspeople, the jewelers, and the clothiers. Yeah, sock it to the

rich. Let us know when hitting yourself in the face begins to hurt. Leveling programs undermine confidence and lock up the economy in ways bound to fail. It hurts the little guy and puts the small-minded in power. What benefits the person, the community, or the state to have a person do nothing?”

“The person gets some quality of life.”

“But I thought that you believed people should work, that they have to do the work that is available that they are qualified to do?”

“Yes.”

“Then no one should be paid to do nothing. What would you have them do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Perhaps, if they are going to receive unemployment benefits they should spend some time learning skills to do a job that needs to be done, receiving counseling if its needed, and doing other tasks around the community that the unemployment money might otherwise have been spent on had this person not been employed. Should the unemployed just be given wealth or should they work for it?”

“They should probably work for it.”

“If they are not, you are simply stealing wealth from other people to pay the poor to keep them out of your sight.”

“I don’t see it that way. Society has an obligation to those without means.”

“An obligation for opportunity, not guaranteed result. If government has a place, it is to facilitate transition, not to support. There is a joke about the person of faith in the middle of the ocean who turns away rescue convinced that ‘God will provide.’ The person succumbs and, at heaven’s pearly gates, demands of God why he was not rescued? God replies, ‘I sent you a helicopter.’ Help people become successful. Do not undermine their possibilities.”

“I still don’t see it that way.”

“And, hence, the problem. What does a trade deficit tell you?”

“That we are buying too much from abroad.”

“Then you are looking at the problem with the discredited view of an 18th century mercantilist. If you reach across a border and barter a good or service you desire for a different good or service that you produce, is it an even trade?”

“Yes, we both benefit.”

“The good or service doesn’t matter, does it.”

“Not really. But a deficit isn’t barter; it’s money.”

“Money is a token for goods or services yet to be determined—a stack of chips to be redeemed later for something the other party finds worthwhile. That stack wouldn’t exist if this side had goods or services in demand. Rather than artificially lower the deficit, our job is to figure out what we can make efficiently that others want to buy. If one can buy something cheaper abroad, for you to require it to be made at home steals wealth from the poor and reduces their quality of life. You should learn how economic engines work and cease to embrace ideas that have never worked and never will.”

“I am a patriot.”

“As a charter member of the ‘Cult of the Flag’, symbols seem to matter more to you than the reality behind them. You’d trample on the Constitution to save the symbol of it. Would you give your life for a greater whole? Individual? Family? Church? Religion? Nation? Principle? Society? Would you know how to decide? You have no comprehensive worldview that can be ‘proved’ one way or another. Your political party is built on a foundation of platitudes. Their dogma is designed to win elections, not encourage you to think. And you don’t care, because the appearance of power is a good enough narcotic to keep your shoulder to the wheel.”

“You just want your own way.”

“My job is to empower individuals, not with my ideas, but to that which they, themselves, validate. Only then do individuals become powerful enough to attenuate power. Only then can

individuals laugh you away from the foolish and unworkable. Until then, our foreign policy is rudderless.”

“We don’t believe America should impose itself on the world.”

“Do you honestly believe that a political vacuum is benign?”

“We believe that the United Nations is the proper forum for international decisions.”

“So you practice passive injustice. Toleration of evil comes from being unable to nose it out. President Woodrow Wilson, educated in history and the classics as he was, still believed in hope more than in lessons of humanity. He missed the basic principle that lust for power is a great motivator. His League of Nations, as the United Nations after it, was designed to fail since it could not and would not hold people accountable for what they do or say. United Nations Charter, in Chapter II, Article 2, Paragraph 7, shields ostensibly local activities of member nations from the basic principles of society expressed in its own Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

“I believe that nations should be free to decide for themselves how they will be governed.”

“You believe that states matter more than the individuals who create them. Freedom is not a universal principle, power is. All history from the Mesopotamian kings and Egyptian pharaohs to today has been about gaining power and keeping it. And you dare to think we are different? Each century finds a new way to battle for control. The only issue we face is what next?

“The smart answer should be ‘no more of what has not worked before’ even if gussied up with new lipstick. Ironically, if we can mediate the grasp for power with a fabric of society that endorses educated, thoughtful, responsible liberty, the governance that results may be more powerful than that what has gone before, yet able to temper hubris . . . for a time.”

“Untrustworthy in what you say, your compassion does not translate to consistent sensible action. If the political class controls the bureaucracy that interprets the regulations, you get to suck up to those with their hands on the levers of power.

“The only candidate worth supporting is one who can recognize the difference between a principle and a platitude, and who will begin to simplify the Byzantine government you would build for selfish reasons.”

“I have principles. I’m liberal and proud of it.”

“You think you are liberal, no doubt, but have you really examined your positions or worked at why you have them? You don’t understand the principles of classical liberalism or know whether your party follows them. Is a liberal authoritarian?”

“No.”

“Then why are so-called liberals in government so bent on imposing their social views on others. Is a liberal dogmatic?”

“No.”

“Then why are so-called liberals in government tied to collectivist economic policies that have never worked? Is a liberal protectionist?”

“No.”

“Then why do they insist on legislating protection for their special friends? Is a liberal closed to the opinions of others?”

“No.”

“Then why do liberals in government belittle the opinions of others and use specious arguments to stop the discussion? Do you apply your intellect to passing the best laws?”

“Yes”

“Then why do you vote for laws you have never read? And why would you vote for laws that if you read them, would be incomprehensible? You would manufacture magical laws with a mumbo jumbo of legalese that you would control as a high priest privileged to decipher the incantations. Laws must be able to be understood . . . and if you can’t understand them, how am I supposed to? Yet you think you are doing your job.

“Those who call themselves liberals are what they are, but their character flaw is to see themselves as something they are not. A mirror would show them distasteful things if they dared look.”

“Nonsense. I’m an independent thinker.”

“You listen to your leaders and tend to toe the line behind what is said, but where do those notions come from? What experience makes you more than grass blowing this way and that?”

“Well, they sound good to me. They feel right. I don’t support laws about manners and politeness.”

“Then you don’t feel that hate speech should be punished.”

“Hate speech is, well, hateful.”

“But political correctness should not be legislated.”

“Well . . .

“Look at liberality in classical philosophy. Aristotle proposed the Golden Mean, proposing that balance between extremes was the virtuous place to be, and that that point might vary from individual to individual. For example, courage is the proper point between recklessness and timidity and temperance, the proper balance between too little and too much. For Aristotle, liberality is the balance between prodigality and meanness.”

“I can believe that.”

“To be sure, Aristotle believed taxation was appropriate, but what is the balance between taking too little and taking too much? Today, one political group uses unbridled sympathy to justify the taking of the wealth of another and calls it liberality. The Aristotelian virtue of liberality admires personal contributions, not forced contributions from others. If the Golden Mean may vary from person to person, when it comes to liberality, perhaps the law should command little and education should commend much.”

“But there is so much injustice and so much to be done!”

“And you would save your own conscience to do it with other people’s wealth?”

“That’s not fair!”

“Precisely. That’s not fair. But what is unfair is that the means you use to achieve your end have unintended consequences that defeat your very purpose. By commanding and complicating tax

law, you open the door to political partnerships that defeat the efficiency of the economy. Wealth corrodes government. It always has. Corruption and abuse lead from autocracy to oligarchy to democracy to republic, yet wealth still corrodes. President Eisenhower warned to beware the military-industrial complex. He described the political economic collusion practiced today by Congress, their puppet bureaucrats, and non-governmental organizations—be they businesses, not-for-profits, or political parties. Adam Smith was correct to be wary of everyone, including you, a willing shill. Let a classic cliché appeal to your emotions, your guard drops, and, *voilà*, you have become an accomplice.”

“I’m not that gullible.”

“What makes you gullible is your need for instant gratification. You want results. Fix this problem now!”

“Results matter.”

“If this generation’s breadwinner hasn’t the skill to earn bread, you give bread from someone else’s larder with no thought whatsoever that you will have to raid the same larder next month for not having retrained the breadwinner to earn his own bread. The process to get results matters. If this generation’s breadwinner hasn’t the skill to earn bread, then make sure the children in the family become capable. Our schools do break the cycle of poverty quite well, but that happens over time.”

“I do the best I can with principles I believe.”

“You see no inconsistency that your politics misuse words to entertain, complain, club, and confuse. For you, politics, the art of the possible, means behavior that for ordinary citizens would be out of bounds. Your political class plays to the flaw in journalistic “objectivity.” For a generation the habit of major news media has been to relate positions and duck judgment. If one side denies every claim by the opposition *ad nauseam* and without evidence supporting the denial, your uncritical audience, swayed by the journalistic company it keeps, will never recognize its error.”

You don’t support me because of your party affiliation.”

“I am disappointed to hear you suggest that. I expect challenge—intellectual scrutiny, but I don’t expect that you would challenge my integrity, my motives; that you would set up straw men, easily shot down, just to deflect attention from the substance. I expect an accurate précis of the argument made and then a cogent challenge to it. In its absence, I won’t bother to address it. Democrats and Republicans are closer than you think. Small-minded, big-talking psychopaths hijack both parties in their lust for power, and the journalists who should detect it for us are so gullible they don’t laugh the hijackers off the stage.

“People see the shortcomings and don’t trust the process to be better at self-correction than newly offered alternatives. They see change and run to the dream of order that demagogues project as a panacea, when underneath lies only a grab for power, playing one group against another. The villainy they accuse others of is the villainy they themselves practice. You don’t trust the engine of the economy, do you?”

“You won’t admit that America is in its decline and we want to do something to cushion people from it.”

“Decline is an unsubstantiated opinion for which you’d force everyone to submit to an unworkable response. What you take as decline is change. How funny that you call for change but are unwilling to embrace it. You don’t trust the checks and balances of government. You don’t trust people. Well, I don’t trust you. You’re afraid of the future, instead of feeling the exhilaration of facing the unknown, confident of tools honed by experience.”

“I work politically with others to make things happen.”

“Does politics require one to dirty one’s hands? The power class would hijack campaigns for so-called rights, and then try to define additional ‘rights’ to consolidate even more power. H.L. Mencken wasn’t too cynical to suggest that the urge to save humankind is almost always a front for the urge to rule. You might as well shout ‘Power to the Sheeple!’ while you make decisions in their name for your own interest. You hurry to get somewhere, and call it progress, but it’s a backward push of organized power, skating over the surface of facts just fast enough to keep your fantasies afloat.

“Politicians accused Socrates of what they practice everyday—to make the worst case seem better. But politicians never pay the price when costs exceed the benefit. Instead they get special consideration, pensions, directorships, lucrative speaking engagements, and buildings named after them. Remind me what you and your political party have done to protect us, keep our money safe, stamp out voter fraud and pork, enhance education, get the world to live civilly, control spending, defeat racism, deal with unwanted children? The political class claims to represent the common man, but instead of representation, they abuse them. What makes you believe you deserve my vote?”

“I don’t have to listen to this.”

“Do you prefer to learn from private conversation in this office or from public outcry in response to printed editorials? You may not wish to listen, but you need to hear. Ever hear of the phrase ‘the banality of evil’? Hannah Arendt coined it to describe the casual toleration of extreme misbehavior. You see misbehavior, ignore it, and then go home, your conscience clear, to play with your wife and kids. You are being unmasked. Politicians make conscious attempts to make us stupid, using cheap rhetorical flashes designed to confuse. And should I respond to that with anything less than full-throated anger? Your party has come to believe things it can’t possibly understand. Good people have had their party stolen from underneath them and they don’t know where to turn.”

“I’m not getting anywhere.”

“Congressman, you’re on the wrong end of reality to be able to get somewhere. Where’s your compass? Where do you want to go? Right now you act like a sheep herded by party leadership. If you feel you aren’t getting anywhere, first decide where you want to go.

“I can’t afford you. You travel too close to the edge. Civilization has such a thin veneer and so many, ignorant of the fact like you, would milk it into collapse.

“I appreciate you taking the time to visit,, but I wonder if it is time to change the editorial vocabulary of the conversation.”

“What do you mean?”

“You debate rather than discuss—to win rather than come to understanding. The goal of a debate is to win, regardless of the merit of your position, and not get caught using misleading premises and unsubstantiated warrants. You are like Guildenstern, whom Hamlet exposed, asking him to play the flute. He said he had not the skill. And yet, Hamlet chastised, ‘You would play upon me?’

“An editorial’s job is to detect and expose the misuse of democracy. Public conversation is infected with abuse for which we have no acceptable label. It’s not lying, but reckless disregard for the truth. Until now, polite conversation has required euphemisms for such behavior, but there is a word that fits it precisely. Because abuse is so ubiquitous, drastic action is called for. The sensible response whenever such behavior is identified is to use the word in editorials.

“When people will say anything to get their way, when people will dance a sidestep to avoid responsibility, when the political class bloviates endlessly, the time has come in our editorials to explicitly call ‘Bullshit!’ when we see it.”