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The Problem Is Politics

P. J. O'ROURKE

Well, I wish I had better news for you, but the barbarians are at the gates. We are besieged by pagans—savage, brutish worshippers of big government. Theirs is not even a golden calf. They've abandoned the Gold Standard. They worship the taxing and spending of a fiat god, all the more dangerous for being both false and imaginary.

Now, we thought Ronald Reagan, our Charles Martel, had stopped the pillaging hordes of Jimmy Carter at the Battle of Poitiers—also known as the 1980 election. Even the heathen slime Bill Clinton said, “The era of big government is over.” We thought we'd won.

We were wrong. They're back. And they want to sacrifice us and all our worldly goods on the blood drenched altar of politics. These lesser breeds bow down to four ton senators, to cloven hooved congressmen, to presidential candidates stinking of collectivist brimstone and crowned with horns of socialism.



P. J. O'Rourke is America's leading political satirist and an H. L. Mencken research fellow at the Cato Institute. A former editor of National Lampoon, he has written for American Spectator, Esquire, the New Republic, and Rolling Stone. Now a correspondent for the Atlantic, his most recent book is On The Wealth of Nations. O'Rourke gave this speech at the 2008 Cato Benefactor Summit.

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Theirs is a Satanist civics. They will sell their souls in the belief that government can heal the sick, raise the dead, make the old feel young, and make the young go out and vote.

They hate our freedom. The part of our freedom that they hate the most is our free market capitalism. But capitalism is one of the most important inventions in human history. If it weren't for debt and equity, all of the innovators, manufacturers, and businessmen who have brought prosperity to the free world would have to get their money the way the rest of us do—by asking their wives.

So the worshipers of big government are back with their lies and their empty promises. And what do we do about it? I don't know. I'm too stupid to answer that question.

But in fairness to myself, I'm not just stupid. I am a student of stupidity. I am a political reporter.

It occurs to me that America could wind up with a Democratic president. This scares me. Not because I hate Democrats—although I do, come to think of it—but because a strong Democratic

to quit. That's why we need a Republican president—not because Republicans are good but because we need gridlock. I love gridlock. Gridlock means government can't do things.

The two most frightening words in Washington are “bipartisan consensus.” Bipartisan consensus is when my doctor and my lawyer agree with my wife that I need help.

Bipartisan consensus—like the stimulus package that has been delivered to us courtesy of Congress and the president. A \$168 billion stimulus package that is supposed to change the trajectory of a \$13 trillion economy.

Now, even somebody who flunked high school physics—and I did—can tell you that the energy of \$168 billion is not sufficient to budge \$13 trillion worth of inertia. It's like trying to use Dennis Kucinich to push Hillary Clinton off the Democratic campaign platform.

We *could* wind up with a Democratic president. We *will* wind up with a Democratic Congress. Now, I am a Republican. I'm a rotten Republican quite a lot of the time, but a Republican nonetheless. And as a Republican,

I've got to say that the 2006 midterm elections made me very upset at the Republicans. I mean, Jack Abramoff, Bob Ney, Randy “Duke” Cunningham, Tom DeLay, Mark Foley. The electorate was almost too nauseated to make it to the polls to vote Democratic.

It took a Democratic majority in the House of Representatives 40 years—from 1954 to 1994—to get that corrupt and arrogant, and the Republicans did it in just 12. And people say that we Republicans don't have a lot on the ball. The Republicans thought they had the House of Representatives so well redistricted that the only places

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president and a strong Democratic Congress could put an end to partisan bickering in Washington and result in politicians from both parties working together to solve America's problems. And then we're really screwed.

I have been covering politics for 38 years. Trust me: we don't want politics

where you could elect a Democrat were the parts of New Orleans that are still underwater. Republicans forgot. They forgot that there is such a thing as an angry voter. And hell, I'm one, and I am a Republican.

Republicans deserve to lose. But do we deserve the Democrats? Well, the Democrats are going to produce more ethanol. Although, up in the back hills of Kentucky, they've been making high octane stuff out of corn mash for years and I can't see that it has done their economy a whole lot of good. Under the Democrats, the government will negotiate with drug companies for Medicare drug prices. If the government shows the same hard-headed, tight-fisted bargaining savvy negotiating drug prices that it shows negotiating defense contracts, Preparation H will cost \$400.

Best of all, there is ethics reform. Congressmen will no longer be able to get a meal from a lobbyist unless the congressman brings a note from his doctor showing that he is bulimic and the meal will be returned.

There is only one thing that gives me hope as a Republican, and that is the Democrats. It's going to be hard to do a worse job running America than the Republicans have, but if anybody can do it, it's the Democrats.

Two substantive political issues are the federal budget deficit and the war in Iraq. Now, if you're electing Democrats to control government spending, then you're marrying Angelina Jolie for her brains.

This leaves the Democrats with one real issue: Iraq. And so far the best that any Democratic presidential candidate has been able to manage with Iraq is to make what I think of as the high

“Government controlled health care is going to drive the best people out of the business. Who wants to spend years studying to be a doctor, just to become a government bureaucratic hack?”

school sex promise: I will pull out in time, honest dear.

Meanwhile, the Republicans have got John McCain. Everybody loves John McCain. Everybody respects John McCain: He's tough. He's consistent. He's wrong. John thinks the war in Iraq is a good idea; the electorate doesn't. It's like McCain's slogan is “wrong and strong.”

Meanwhile, there is the Democratic side of things, where Barack Obama may be altering the whole political equilibrium. Barack Obama is an indication that America has reached an important benchmark in race relations. It is now officially more important to be cute than it is to be white.

And Barack Obama is cute. He's very cute. And he's nice. And it has been a long time since any political party has had the cute, nice vote sewn up.

The problem for Barack is that he just doesn't have much political stature. But there is a sort of Disney factor in American politics. Think of America's politicians. Think of them all as the Seven Dwarves. They're all short. They're short on ethics. They're short on common sense. They're short on experience. They're short on something. But we keep thinking one of those dwarves is going to save our Snow White butt.

We've got Dopey right now. We had Sleazy before him. Grumpy lost in 2004. Sleepy was great in the eighties but he's dead. So how about Obama?

Which leaves us with Hillary. She's going to reform health care. I guess health care being a key political issue, it's a sign that my baby boom generation is finally maturing.

Now, sure, we're still as self-absorbed and inward-looking as we ever were, but we're staring up a colonoscopy scope now, instead of gazing at our navels.

Hey, memo to Hillary: You already reformed health care 15 years ago.

Just the outline of Hillary's 1993 health care reform plan was 1,400 pages—just the outline. You could stand on it to paint the ceiling.

And of course there is a cheaper way to make health care less expensive, a simpler way to make health care less expensive: Just make it worse. And I think Hillary can do that.

Because government controlled health care is going to drive the best people out of the business. Who wants to spend years studying to be a doctor, just to become a government bureaucratic hack?

Some day you will be wheeled in for a heart bypass operation, and a surgeon will be the person who is now behind the counter when you renew your car registration at the department of motor vehicles.

If we're not careful, we're going to wind up with a health care system like

they've got in Canada, a nation that is broke from health care spending, even though Canada is a sparsely populated country with a shortage of gunshot wounds, crack addicts, and huge tort judgments.

What are we as Americans supposed to learn from a medical system devoted to hockey injuries, sinus infections, and from trying to pronounce French vowels?



Well, we'll learn to fix prices. Because that's all that health care reform really is. It's just price-fixing. Price-fixing works great in Cuba and North Korea and in rent-controlled apartments in New York. Everybody knows how easy it is to find an inexpensive apartment in a nice neighborhood in New York City.

Another thing that gets me about Hillary is this: why is

price-fixing such a great thing when she does it, but if a couple of businessmen get together on a golf course that's a big crime?

Contrary to all the rules of political humor, I just hate politics. Politics stink. Think about how we use the word "politics." Are office politics ever a good thing? When somebody plays politics to get a promotion, does he deserve it? When we call a coworker a "real politician," is that a compliment? Politics stink. And to my mind, libertarianism is a room deodorizer. It's trying to keep that bad smell of politics out of home, school, and office.

But let's make a distinction between politics and politicians. Be-

cause there are a lot of people who are under a misapprehension that the problem is certain politicians who stink. They say that if you impeach George Bush, everything will be fine. Or if you nab Ted Kennedy for a DUI, the nation's problems will be solved. But unfortunately it's just not that simple.

The problem is not really politicians. The problem is politics. Politicians are chefs—some good, some bad—but politics is road kill. The problem isn't the cook. The problem is the cookbook. The key ingredient of politics is the idea that all of society's ills can be cured politically. It's like a cookbook where the recipe for everything is to fry it. The fruit cocktail is fried. The soup is fried. The salad is fried. So is the ice cream and cake. And your pinot noir is rolled in breadcrumbs and dunked in the deep fat fryer. It is just no way to cook up public policy. Politics is greasy. Politics is slippery. Politics can't tell the truth.

But I don't blame the politicians for this. Because just think what the truth would sound like on the campaign stump. Even a little, bitty bit of truth. "No, I can't fix public education. The problem isn't funding or teachers unions or lack of vouchers or absence of computer equipment in the classroom. The problem is your damned kids."

Now, that's just not going to work.

There is only one number that matters in politics. And you may think that that's the number of votes, but that's not the number. The number that matters in politics is the lowest common denominator. It is the avowed purpose of politics to bring the policies of our nation down to a

“The key ingredient of politics is the idea that all of society's ills can be cured politically. It's like a cookbook where the recipe for everything is to fry it. The fruit cocktail is fried.”

level where they are good for everyone. No matter how foolish, irresponsible, selfish, grasping, or vile everyone may be, politics seeks fairness for them all. I do not. I am here to speak in favor of unfairness.

I have a 10 year old at home, and she is always saying, "That's not fair." When she says that, I say, "Honey, you're cute; that's not fair. Your family is pretty well off; that's not fair. You were born in America; that's not fair. Honey, you had better pray to God that things don't start getting fair for you."

After all my time covering politics, I know a lot of politicians. They're intelligent. They're diligent. They're talented. I like them. I count them as friends. But when these friends of mine take their intelligence, their diligence, and their talent and they put these into the service of politics, ladies and gentlemen, when they do that, they turn into leeches upon the commonwealth.

They are dogs chasing the cat of freedom. They are cats tormenting the mouse of responsibility. They are mice gnawing on the insulated wiring of individualism. They are going to hell in a hand basket, and they stole that basket from you. They are the ditch carp in the great river of democracy. And this is what one of their friends says.



Cato Scholar Profile: **ANDREW J. COULSON**

ANDREW J. COULSON is the director of Cato's Center for Educational Freedom. He is the author of *Market Education: The Unknown History*. Coulson's writings have appeared in the *Journal of Research in Teaching of English* and Education Policy Analysis Archives as well as the *New York Post*, *Seattle Times*, *Detroit Free Press*, and *Wall Street Journal*. He currently serves on the Advisory Council of the E. G. West Centre for Market Solutions in Education at the University of Newcastle, U.K.

What inspired you to leave Microsoft for the world of public policy?

I wanted to do something with more of a social purpose, and I started researching education in my spare time. I soon realized that much was already known about pedagogical methods and curriculum. The problem wasn't that we didn't know what effective educational practices looked like; the problem was that we didn't have a system that could reliably replicate those practices.

What are the most important issues facing American education today?

Problem one is that our current monopoly school systems lack incentives to be effective, efficient, or responsive to families. Problem two is that surprisingly few people understand the systemic nature of problem one, believing that the monopoly can be "fixed" if we only try harder—or by centralizing it even more at the national level.

In your view, what is the most promising proposal for reform in education policy?

The best realistic policy we've developed is a combination of personal use tax credits and scholarship donation tax credits. Basically, if you pay for the education of your own or someone else's children, we cut your taxes. Cato published model legislation along those lines last December and we'll soon be releasing a tool that estimates its fiscal impact. In all five states we've looked at so far, this proposal would generate substantial savings.

Why are tax credits superior to vouchers?

The key benefit of tax credits is that they reduce compulsion. Under vouchers, everyone has to fund every kind of school; that produces battles over what kinds of schools should get vouchers—for instance over the voucher funding of conservative Islamic schools in the Netherlands. With tax credits, people are either spending their own money on their own children, or they are choosing the scholarship organization that gets their donation. No one has to pay for education they find objectionable.

What is the status of efforts to promote school choice in America?

They are numerous, lively, and growing.

How will the Center for Educational Freedom continue to work to improve American education?

We will continue to arm school choice groups around the country with research, model legislation, and fiscal analysis tools to help them more powerfully make the case for market education, we will relentlessly deflate the claims of would-be central planners by revealing the failure of their chosen policies domestically and abroad, and we will continue reaching out directly to the public via books, op-eds, and other media, explaining why the value of educational freedom goes far beyond improving test scores and saving money.

A PROFILE IN GIVING:

DAVID LOCKWOOD: *It's Never Too Late to Give*



David Lockwood, a professor from East Lansing Michigan, chose to remember Cato very generously in his will. He did so, despite the fact that he never signed on as a Cato Sponsor during his life. His generosity speaks to the fact that Cato was an important part of his life.

David Lockwood's example serves to illustrate the point that there is no "correct formula" for giving and that it is never "too early or too late" to give. Donors occasionally get the impression that they are obligated to give sequentially—first as lifetime sponsors and later as testators who make a gift to Cato under their will. The truth is quite to the contrary: Cato is interested in whatever mode of giving that works best for you.

A bequest is a simple and flexible way of ensuring a legacy for Cato. While bequests can take many forms, there are three basic ways of making a bequest. We will give brief examples of these three basic forms in order to give you a sense of how bequests work.

Leaving the residue of your estate to Cato, after making bequests to other individuals (or organizations), is a simple and effective form of bequest. To make such a gift, your will would say something to the effect of: "I give the residue of my real and personal estate to the Cato Institute." This residuary gift was the form of bequest used by David Lockwood.

It is also possible to leave a fixed percent-

age of your estate to Cato. If you choose to use this method, your will would include phrasing such as "I give 30 percent of the residue of my estate to the Cato Institute." Please bear in mind that the percentage given can be as high or low as you wish—30 percent, 50 percent or whatever.

Finally, you have the option of making a specific bequest to Cato, that is, of leaving Cato a specific amount of cash or specific property. Under this scenario, your will would say something like "I give the sum of "\$100,000 to the Cato Institute." Or it could say, "I give 500 shares of XYZ stock to the Cato Institute."

Charitable bequests are deductible for estate tax purposes. Unlike income taxes and their hodgepodge of percentage limitations, there is no limit on deductibility for estate tax purposes. This broad deductibility often gives rise to the comment that "you can choose to give your estate to Uncle Sam or to charity." This bit of popular wisdom holds true provided your estate is sufficiently large to be subject to estate taxes.

Cato is deeply grateful for Professor Lockwood's magnificent bequest. His friends and family can be assured that his legacy will fight the good fight for liberty.

For more information about bequests and other planned gifts, contact Cato's director of planned giving, **Gayllis Ward**, at 646-717-2080, email gward@cato.org.



CATO UNIVERSITY 2008

Freedom's Campaign in the 21st Century

JULY 20-25, 2008 • SAN DIEGO

Cato University is the Cato Institute's premier educational event of the year. This annual program brings together outstanding faculty and participants from across the country and around the globe who share a commitment to liberty and learning.

In addition, Cato University has become an opportunity to create a family legacy of liberty—with parents participating with children, grandparents sharing

the experience with grandchildren, and all three generations joining together.

THIS YEAR'S PROGRAM — Freedom's Campaign in the 21st Century will be held at the Rancho Bernardo Inn, a luxurious resort near San Diego. It will energetically take you through the prospects for and threats to freedom in the United States and around the globe.

PRICE

Cato University's low price of \$925 covers all meals, receptions, lectures, materials, books, and evening events, but not overnight room charges at the Rancho Bernardo Inn.

FULL DETAILS—including the list of faculty and a convenient online registration form are available at www.cato-university.org.



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PHOTO: Poolside at the Rancho Bernardo

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