

“THE CONGRESSIONAL DIRECTORY NOW READS LIKE A CASEBOOK OF LUNACY”

There are a number of reasons to read this entire article—Republican Mike Lofgren’s explanation of why the TeaParty convinced him to leave his congressional staffer position after 30 years: the pithy descriptions of Republican nut-jobs (like the quote I’ve taken for my title, which he uses to describe Steve King, Michele Bachman, Paul Broun, Patrick McHenry, Virginia Foxx, Louie Gohmert, and Allen West), the accurate description of the corporate-purchased impotence of the Democratic party, and the description of how today’s Republican party puts party above the good of the country.

But I was particularly struck by this tie between normative behavior—collegiality and good faith—and the functioning of our democracy.

It should have been evident to clear-eyed observers that the Republican Party is becoming less and less like a traditional political party in a representative democracy and becoming more like an apocalyptic cult, or one of the intensely ideological authoritarian parties of 20th century Europe. This trend has several implications, none of them pleasant.

In his “Manual of Parliamentary Practice,” Thomas Jefferson wrote that it is less important that every rule and custom of a legislature be absolutely justifiable in a theoretical sense, than that they should be generally acknowledged and honored by all parties. These include unwritten rules, customs and courtesies that lubricate the legislative machinery and keep governance a relatively civilized procedure. The US Senate has more complex procedural rules

than any other legislative body in the world; many of these rules are contradictory, and on any given day, the Senate parliamentarian may issue a ruling that contradicts earlier rulings on analogous cases.

The only thing that can keep the Senate functioning is collegiality and good faith. During periods of political consensus, for instance, the World War II and early post-war eras, the Senate was a "high functioning" institution: filibusters were rare and the body was legislatively productive. Now, one can no more picture the current Senate producing the original Medicare Act than the old Supreme Soviet having legislated the Bill of Rights.

Far from being a rarity, virtually every bill, every nominee for Senate confirmation and every routine procedural motion is now subject to a Republican filibuster. Under the circumstances, it is no wonder that Washington is gridlocked: legislating has now become war minus the shooting, something one could have observed 80 years ago in the Reichstag of the Weimar Republic. As Hannah Arendt observed, a disciplined minority of totalitarians can use the instruments of democratic government to undermine democracy itself.

Among other things, it describes why I never supported filibuster reform: Not because I like the filibuster or the Senate's other structurally undemocratic features. But because attempting to tweak the filibuster just ignores the root cause of our problems, that Republicans have given up the norms that keep our democracy working and serve, however imperfectly, to achieve the best outcome for the country.

As Lofgren notes, this nihilistic approach serves an explicit Republican strategy.

A couple of years ago, a Republican committee staff director told me candidly

(and proudly) what the method was to all this obstruction and disruption. Should Republicans succeed in obstructing the Senate from doing its job, it would further lower Congress's generic favorability rating among the American people. By sabotaging the reputation of an institution of government, the party that is programmatically against government would come out the relative winner.

But it destroys the country in the process.

Lofgren doesn't quite say it, but it seems the logical conclusion of this state of affairs (barring a resurgence of Democratic values and spine and a new skepticism on the part of the press) is the collapse of the country, leaving just the corporatists and their Bible thumping puppets behind.