

I have spent the better part of a year roaming around central Asia during the last decade. A couple of years ago I found this little bit of instruction in the room guide at the Lachin Hotel in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan.

*Dear Guests! It is strongly prohibited:*

- (1) *To light a fire at the places not intended for it;*
- (2) *To take away the food and tableware from the restaurant;*
- (3) *To bring with you and to consume foodstuffs and drinks not purchased within the hotel;*
- (4) *To bring visitors into your rooms from 23:00 till 08:00 [this one is obviously a bit prurient in nature...]; and*
- (5) *To break the internal order and to disturb the guests with your activities.*

Now the first thing one should notice is that there are evidently folks in Turkmenistan who, upon checking into their room, would proceed to build a fire in the middle of the floor to cook shashlyk or palov. Yes, it's not a very bright thing to do, but it is also a very different way of thinking and looking at the world. If you don't get to town much, you might actually try building a fire in your hotel room. If you don't know anything else, you tend to act the way you would back on the ranch. I know, because I spent almost a year sleeping under the truck in Montana and North Dakota a few years back during my oil-field days. You can lose a lot of couth out there in the boonies.

Spending a significant amount of time in Washington, D.C., the last several years has also confirmed to me that there are folks with radically different perspectives on lots of things. Much of the difference is related to background and culture. Our culture here in the West is very different from the East Coast. For the most part, western culture is connected to the land, while the East Coast is connected to urban notions.

There is also a vast chasm today between how liberals and conservatives see the world, especially regarding how our republic form of government should work and how equality should be regarded. The conservative view fostered by John Locke centers on equality of opportunity, a government where all people are treated similarly in their pursuit of happi-

## TALES FROM THE WASTELAND

# Musings of an Optimist

*The battle for America's soul.*

*By Barry Perryman, Ph.D.*

ness without social, ethnic, or economic barriers. This meritocracy generally ensures that position or status flow to those best qualified, and the government is empowered to protect these inalienable rights. In contrast, the liberal view derived by Jean-Jacques Rousseau seeks a government where people have about the same general outcome. Equality of outcome requires a reduction or elimination of inequalities among individuals by empower-



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**Equality of opportunity  
inspires growth and success,  
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ing the government to transfer position, status, or property acquired by successful people to individuals who are less qualified or unmotivated. This action requires institutional discrimination to achieve.

The failure of the liberal system and the following success of the conservative approach is evident in the history of the Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts. The initial communal system (equal outcome) failed miserably, while the second approach of equal

opportunity saved them and essentially built the United States of America. Equality of opportunity inspires growth and success, while equality of outcome discourages it. These are opposite positions and cannot be reconciled completely. This is the monumental social challenge that we now face as a country, a battle for its soul.

It doesn't help when we continually elect unqualified representatives. In my experience I can confidently say that among our elected representatives and their staffs, there are some of the most thoughtful, intelligent, and selfless people our country has to offer. On the other hand, there are also some of the most thoughtless, ignorant, and self-serving people mankind has ever produced.

However, I am now feeling a huge dose of optimism. On my most recent visit to "the Hill," I heard and had more substantive conversations than in all my other trips combined. Not just on natural-resource issues, but

on a broad spectrum of topics. During the previous administration there was a general malaise, a stagnation of conversation; it was a top-down government masterfully controlled by the White House. After the last election, the mood changed to confusion and most were asking what was possible under the new and novel administration. There was guarded confidence on the conservative side and vitriolic anger and denial in the liberal camp. Between spring and fall of 2017, this malaise and confusion gave way to an opti-

mistic, surging energy. Thoughtful people in both parties have been unchained, and the possibilities are boundless—or at least as boundless as the Senate will allow!

Don't misunderstand my optimism. I am a realistic optimist. It has taken decades to fill the swamp and it will take decades to drain, if it *can* be drained. But for now, sacred cows are being butchered for the first time in a long time, and some of the garbage is being hauled away. It's just that there is really, really...a lot...of it. ■

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