

The Case for Moderation

by Vic Berecz

In this era of gross incivility from both the right and the left, I think of myself as a person of moderation and I advocate taking well-thought-out positions on each issue of the day. Your reaction to that may be ... boring. If that's the case, read on for at least a couple of more lines because well-defined moderate positions can be very compelling when stated emphatically. For instance, I believe that:

- ... we all should pay taxes willingly**
- ... immigration should be encouraged**
- ... change happens, we must learn to live with it**
- ... we've given up any expectation of privacy**
- ... compromise is essential to progress**
- ... it does "take a village."**

I'm not sure which of these six statements convinced you to continue reading ... in any case, let me explain myself.

Little in this real-world of ours is *black or white* ... in fact, most issues must be examined *in shades of gray*. Whether it's the ancient commandment *thou shalt not kill* evaluated in the contexts of capital punishment, abortion, war, self-defense, or healthcare "death panels" ... or the oft-repeated recent imperative *read my lips, no new taxes* evaluated in a world beset by terrorism, criminality, pandemic diseases, and other needs demanding community funding ... the best answers often lie in those shades of gray. Let's briefly examine each of these six beliefs from the points-of-view of moderation, compromise, pragmatism, and incremental progress.

The ultimate individual freedom is to become a part of, or to remove ourselves from a community. By associating with and giving allegiance to a community, we accept its strictures and protections. In doing so, we give up certain freedoms for the good of the community as a whole. Most of us are a part of numerous communities, some of which are hierarchical. These often include a family, neighborhood, religious, social, and political organizations, geo-political entities (i.e. governments), and others. Historically, the ultimate punishment for ignoring the strictures of your community was banishment. Banishment – i.e. becoming a hermit – typically made for a short and painful life. That's why most sane human beings innately prefer and recognize the need for community interaction ... it does take a village!

Progress in any community is made by rationalizing the differing ideas and priorities of its members. It doesn't matter whether the issue is a family trying to decide where to go on vacation, or a nation trying to decide how to deal with the costs of healthcare. As part of a community you can't say "everybody for themselves" and just let those without sufficient resources wither and die. The most difficult decision made by a community is determining when to step in and offer a helping hand. Since it's impossible to be all things to all people, there's only one answer ... compromise. That's what it takes to get any on-going process started. And once we've started down a path, we all (I hope) realize that progress comes incrementally ... one step at a time. Often each of those steps again requires some compromise. What is compromise? I think it's recognition that most issues are not black and white, and a willingness to forego some of your own best interests for the good of the community as a whole.

Much of the progress that has taken place in the last century is based on advances in technology. Those of us who were a part of the *computer revolution* understand *Moore's Law* ...

essentially that technological progress is exponential. Whether it's speedy transportation, a *miracle* drug, or a personal computer, we demand technological improvements. As usually happens, to gain something you have to give up something. Implicit in technological progress is the erosion of certain freedoms ... most significantly the freedom we call an *expectation of privacy*. We want the convenience of getting cash anytime, an ATM is the answer ... we want safety there, and surveillance cameras do the trick. Similar scenarios go on and on ... GPS, RFID transponders, the Internet, automobile data collection, satellite-based cameras, and don't forget, you leave traces of DNA virtually everywhere you go. In reality, we as a people have embraced technology and in doing so have given up any expectation of privacy. Is that a bad thing? Not necessarily. For decades courts have said that public figures have limited rights to privacy ... that's why we know too much about David Letterman, Tiger Woods, and Mark Sanford. Here in Florida, our *Sunshine Laws* require all actions by public officials to see the light-of-day. Maybe our acceptance of technology has made us all public figures and we need to figure out a way to live with this new normal ... think of it as our own 15-minutes of fame ... in the sunshine!

A few months ago, a popular newspaper columnist wrote: "Americans have a tendency to sentimentalize a lost innocence that never was." He was talking about the *fabulous fifties* – a time when many of us *came-of-age*. Too often we remember only the feeling of innocence and confidence we felt stepping out into the real-world as young adults. Too often we forget how scared we were when the neighbor kid died of polio. Too often we forget the life-sapping poverty of urban tenements, of rural sharecroppers, or the double standard applied to people of color. Too often we forget the futility of hiding from atomic bombs under school desks or the shadow of *Nike* missile bases in our neighborhoods. We even forget that dad worked at a back-breaking, mind-numbing factory job and still couldn't support the family, so mom spent her evenings doing piece-work in a sweater factory. No, the 50's were not all *Father Knows Best*. Things have changed radically since the 50's, and I would maintain in most respects they've changed for the better. I doubt that many of us would want to go back to the 50's way-of-life if we examined it objectively point-by-point. I certainly wouldn't. Change happens ... we call it progress ... and change creates a *new normal* that successful people learn to live with and navigate.

America has seen continuous progress throughout its history. In part, that success is due to the forward-thinking people who established the moral, spiritual, and governmental foundations of America in our Constitution ... people such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John and Abigail Adams, George Mason, Robert Morris, and Thomas Paine. Please note that I include a woman, two immigrants, traditional Christians, Deists and a "Freethinker" as influential participants in this process. Obviously, our Constitution was the product of important compromises ... between the proponents of central government and state sovereignty ... between slaveholders and those opposing slavery, etc. These founders were very bright people. As participants in some of history's most stupendous changes themselves, they knew that times change ... they could not have anticipated the specifics of the progress we've made since their day, but certainly they anticipated progress. The catalyst for much of that progress over the centuries has been immigration.

The first generation of immigrants from every culture were always stigmatized. In the early days of our republic, it was often the *Krauts* ... like the German-speaking ancestor of my twin granddaughters who served valiantly in the Pennsylvania Militia during the American Revolution. Later came the *Micks*, the *Chinks*, and the *Wops*. My grandparents were a part of the great influx of *Hunkies* that "invaded" our country in the first decade of the last century.

During each of these periods, the first generation of immigrants worked hard for sweat-shop wages in horrendous conditions. Many were slow to learn English and to assimilate. But, their children by-and-large learned English, were educated, began to assimilate, and contributed greatly to the success of our nation. In fact, I believe, it is this recurring immigrant experience that is the unique characteristic that made America great. And, it continues to this day! Would we be better off without either a Bobby Jindal or a Sonia Sotomajor? What is it then that makes people so fearful of immigration? I suspect it's because too many of us see the world as a *zero-sum game* ... thinking anything *they* get, must be taken from *us*. But, America never has been a zero-sum place. We have 400 years of steady growth behind us. And, we should all remember that America's growth was often fueled by the hard-work and brilliant minds that immigrants and their children brought to us.

A fact-of-life is that modern travel, among other things, has made enforcement of immigration laws difficult. If we accept that immigration can be a good thing, the question becomes: how do we gain compliance with improved immigration regulations? I don't believe fences, armed militias, or other relics of history are the answer ... rather the answer must be new technology and common-sense. How about a fool-proof system of universal ID cards? I'm not a technical expert on biometrics, but I do know the technology exists that can make it happen at about \$50 a-pop today. If, without the proper ID, jobs and all government services are unavailable, future undocumented immigrants would be few and far between – that's the common-sense part. A short-term (maybe seasonal) work permit, as well as foreign student and tourist provisions, should also be part of such a universal ID card system, paid for by the immigrants themselves.

That still leaves us with the problem of the millions of so-called “illegal immigrants” who are here now. We must deal with them carefully and humanely. I believe, that in the end, some should stay and become permanent residents probably on a path toward citizenship, some may get temporary work permits and return periodically, some will be deported for good, some (hopefully very few) will be imprisoned here. In summary, let's recognize that we need immigration, and that our goal should be to enact regulations that encourage the most appropriate type of immigration for a given time in history. Let's also recognize that we have the tools to make immigration work, and that's good ... because without immigrants America will stagnate.

Well, that was rather long-winded. Sorry about that, but as the grandson of immigrants I have strong feelings on the subject and I expect immigration will be the next great national debate. The final belief I'll discuss is pretty emphatic and comes right to-the-point. Nothing's free! We demand services from our local, state, and federal governments. Personally, I believe the necessary services should be provided by the lowest level of government that can do the job effectively, with respect to both quality and cost. But, the bottom line is we need government. It's what makes America ... America! Government services cost. Nothing is free. So, the only questions are: what services do we need? which is the most appropriate level of government to provide those services? how much do those services cost? Answer those questions in a common-sense way that meets the universal spiritual mandate we all know as the Golden Rule: *treat others as you want them to treat you* ... and I expect that you also will pay taxes willingly and feel as though you're getting your money's worth.