

Does Enlightened Self-Interest Rule the World?
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Our founding fathers were influenced by the European Enlightenment, a movement reacting to two centuries of Catholic/Protestant religious wars, which ultimately disgusted intellectuals. Religion was the glue that had held Europe together from the fall of Rome to the end of the religious wars. But in its absence, what would be the new glue?

Jefferson took apart his Bible, discarded the "superstitious parts," and rebound the remaining slim volume. He liked the moral teachings of religion but not the superstition. John Adams, a descendant of New England Puritans, had a keener awareness of evil and never trusted to the people's "enlightened self-interest." Benjamin Franklin discarded religion altogether, relying instead on the human mind, observation, and experimentation. He was our first scientist. Thomas Paine thought of religion as he thought of aristocracy, as evil remnants of power that had to be destroyed. He became a great advocate of the French Revolution, never flinching at its excesses.

From our country's beginnings, some believed that human beings are best motivated by enlightened self-interest and others were aware of the dark stirrings of evil in us unless constrained by law. The awareness of human evil is the strong suit of religion, as is fear of forces that we cannot always control. Human beings have both needs: care that self-interest be enlightened and awareness that we suffer from self-delusion, passions, and ignorance of consequences of our actions.

Enlightened self-interest is a difficult discipline for most of us. Self-interest may be there, but not enlightened (knowing what is right in the long run). Examples of this are legion.

Politicians who cannot (or do not) control their sexual urges exhibit flawed thinking. They dismiss the notion that such behavior will ruin their careers, or if they do consider it, they take a chance (Governor Sanford of South Carolina). Also, politicians who believe that they can extort bribes and enrich themselves at the public trough are in denial that they will be caught (Governor Blagojevich of Illinois).

The voting public wants lavish benefits (self-interest) but refuses to tax themselves for them (enlightenment). They get the economic disasters that they deserve (Greece, California).

Radical leftists believe that they are solely guided by enlightened self-interest; they care about freedom (for themselves), gender equality, and tolerance of all behavioral diversity. They disdain money-making (capitalism), bourgeois values (hard work and sexual restraint), and law and order (repression). They have the arrogant belief that political activists are doing God's work (even without belief in God). Leftist activism falls apart in passionately supporting Radical Islamists, who share their revolutionary values, but nothing else.

Rightist activists (Tea Party) fail to see their movement's Anarchist and Fascist underpinnings. Radicals have been fooled before by taking up with Marxists or Fascists, who ultimately lined them up and shot them. These ideologues have never learned that revolutions always eat their young (Iran is learning this today).

Then comes Helen Thomas, a battle-axe reporter who has always considered herself on the side of the angels. After all, she held presidents' feet to the fire. But she also demonstrates very unenlightened self-interest. In her distaste for Jews and Israelis, whom she wants to "go back where they came from" (Germany and Poland), she forgets that her own Lebanese people were Arabic speaking Christians who fled the horror of life under Islam 75 years ago. Should they go back where they came from too? How can she, as a woman with hard-won rights, detest Israelis and love Palestinians? Where do her interests lie?

And while on that subject, how unenlightened are people who vote for Islamist Fascists who will permit them one man, one vote, one time? The Algerians almost did that until stopped by the military. The people of Gaza did the same, and so would the Egyptians if they had a real election today. And well-intentioned Iranians got rid of a modernizing, tyrannical Shah and got instead Islamic fascism, with make-believe

elections. Enlightened self-interest would not have done this, but passion comes from someplace else, not the brain.

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