



Good Thinking and Good Citizenship

Thomas Sowell recently wrote an article in which he suggested that “thinking” is an activity whose time has come and gone. Yet if he is right — and I believe that he is — then it isn’t only the intellectual virtue of analytical rigor of which we deprive ourselves.

The 17th-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote that “thought” is “the essence of morality.” Thinking is no different than any other activity inasmuch as it requires both lots of practice as well as the self-discipline that it takes to commit to all of this practicing. Yet self-discipline, in this context, demands the cultivation of virtues, not just of the mind, but of the thinker’s overall character.

Courage is one virtue that is indispensable to clear thinking. It takes guts to examine one’s own preconceptions, to follow an argument to its logical term — regardless of whether this means the doom of one’s own cherished beliefs. It probably takes even more guts to subject the ideology of the mob, the conventional wisdom, to this same withering interrogation.

Courage, though, is a virtue that in any number of activities can and does coexist with vice. In war and in sports, say, a man’s courage needn’t prevent him from acting unjustly. But the courageous thinker has an acute sense of justice, for there is no idea, regardless of how silly, popular, or offensive it may be, to which he will refuse a fair hearing.

There are more character excellences that clear thinking breeds. However, these virtues alone are enough to commend it.

Courage and justice are goods worth possessing on their own account, but they are also essential to good citizenship — especially when the citizen is supposed to be a self-governing agent.

Lest the individual citizen have the courage of his convictions, the courage to challenge the consensus of “the majority,” the latter promises to reduce itself to nothing more or less than a mob. Ditto if individuals lack justice.

How different matters would be if our culture held thinking in as high esteem as it holds, say, Honey Boofoo. Consider the Benghazi case in light of an America obsessed with thinking clearly.

Democrats are laboring inexhaustibly to convince the public that this whole thing is an issue only





Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on May 13, 2013

because Republicans insist upon “politicizing” it. In a culture in which clear thinking is endemic, no Democratic politician would even conceive of peddling this line, much less attempt to do so.

To the clear thinker, it is a no-brainer that a murderous attack against the American government, an attack about which the latter conveyed what we now know was gross misinformation, is nothing if it isn’t a political event. In other words, it is self-politicizing: It became “politicized” long before anyone could have deliberately set out to make it so.

The clear thinker also knows that even if it is true that Republicans are interested in Benghazi only for the sake of punishing Democrats, this is neither here nor there. Knowledge of a person’s intentions is indispensable to determining his character — not the rightness or wrongness of his actions. For the wrong reasons, one may do the right thing, and for the right reasons, one may act wrongly.

Whether or not the Obama administration is guilty of a coverup of epic proportions is a question worth asking in its own right — regardless of who is asking it, or why.

White House spokesman Jay Carney suggests that the events that unfolded in Benghazi are immaterial because they “happened a long time ago.” The clear thinker realizes that regardless of when Benghazi occurred, time is no more relevant to moral value than is size or color. Unless this was true, it would be pointless for us to discuss anything or anyone from the past.

Like anything else worthwhile, clear thinking is hard work. Yet its benefits — both for the individual and the citizenry — more than compensate for its costs.



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