

## Political Discussions: Wielding the Moral Hammer

Before I tell the story of what triggered today's post I want to explain my usual approach to political discussions. In general, I avoid them. Why? Because I'm a libertarian in deeply liberal Massachusetts and because I've seen conversations between people who disagree quickly plunge into emotional barrages of one-liners with no amicable resolution. I especially avoid getting into political discussions with ideologues. Of all of the discussions and arguments I've been party to almost none of them end with either of us changing our minds. The only rare exceptions have been when the person with whom I'm talking calmly asks me to explain why I believe what I do or calmly asks questions about the source of the facts I'm citing.

With that as background the story starts when I was playing in my Friday morning men's doubles tennis match with three other guys. One of the guys, let's call him George, almost always brings up politics between sets. George hates Trump so he uses the changeovers as an opportunity to vent about Trump's latest actions that offends him. When our first set ended this week George came to the net and asked his two friends (who also happen to be liberal) a question that I'll provide below along with the exchange I had with him. I've added some comments in parenthesis to explain what I meant.

George: Can we find someone to kill Mitch McConnell? (A Republican and Senate Majority Leader. George was referring to McConnell's involvement in the current government shutdown.)

Me: That's what I love about liberals. They want to kill people who disagree with them but if a conservative said something like this they'd scream bloody murder. (I almost never come out this strong but at this point I'd had enough of George's weekly political rants. I wouldn't have reacted this strongly if he hadn't used the word "kill.")

George: So you're OK with the government shutdown?

Me: Yes. (Actually I think there could be a better way to resolve the difference between what Trump wants for border security and what Pelosi and Schumer want [whatever that is] but I answered this way partly to shock George. I play tennis to get away from the constant drone of politics.)

George: Even though it hurts people?

Friend #1: Good one! (Said with a smug smirk on his face.)

Me: As long as the border is not secure people are going to continue to die.

George: You're going to have to explain that to me.

Me: Some other time. I came here to play tennis.

I'm not here to talk about the pros and cons of the shutdown and immigration policy. My purpose is to share some observations and thoughts.

1. I consider George to be an ideologue. [Merriam Webster](#) defines an ideologue as "an often blindly partisan advocate or adherent of a particular ideology." [Oxford](#) defines an ideologue as "an adherent of an ideology, especially one who is uncompromising and dogmatic." George fits this definition because there can be no honest disagreement with him. He is like many other people I've seen who think it's OK to demonize anyone who disagrees with you. That makes it OK to joke about killing, say, Mitch McConnell or Donald Trump. Yet they're apoplectic if don't share their adulation for Obama or – horrors! – dare to say one critical word about him! (George is not an aberration. Other liberal friends have said they wished Trump would die until they realize that Mike Pence would take over. This is unacceptable to them because they believe Pence is more evil than Trump.)
2. George thinks he wields the unquestionable moral trump card because he cares about people while he believes Republicans, conservatives and libertarians don't. I'm not singling out liberals or progressives as the only people who climb onto their moral high horse. Ideologues at each end of the spectrum believe they have a monopoly on moral rectitude. This is one reason why many political discussions end in a stalemate. Each side thinks they're moral and that their opponent is immoral. If you're on the receiving end of this your natural reaction is going to be defensive. Who wants to be called an immoral heathen while also being asked to change your position?
3. My standard way of making my case is to avoid throwing the moral trump card onto the table. If someone presents their favor for a policy such as trying to help the poor or claim that regulations protect us from greedy businessmen I respond by saying their policies often don't accomplish their goals. Or if the topic is climate change I'll say my reading of several hundred scientific papers has lead me to a different conclusion. (Of course my responses need to be backed by research. Plus I know the facts I quote need to come from sources the person is willing to give some credence.) However, when George trotted out the "you don't care who is hurt" ploy he was challenging my moral character. Countering with

practical issues such as the financial cost of securing our border or the legality of trying to enter the U.S. without going through proper channels wouldn't have tackled George's snarky attack on me as a person. So I felt the proper response was to resort to a moral argument of my own and say that his position on open borders results in no controls of who comes in, which means some of the people could be criminals such as members of MS-13.

4. I find it amusing how many liberals mock religious fundamentalists or evangelicals because they constantly refer to God and rigidly adhere to the Bible yet these liberals are just as fundamentalist about their political beliefs and heroes.