

Whataboutism is Redefining the Right



A few weeks ago, my wife and I went out to dinner with a nice couple from church. We didn't know them all that well at the time, being that most of our previous exchanges had taken place at the end of services – a time when loud salutations and tugging children make it difficult to have a quality conversation. Still, at some point, we had become Facebook friends, and came to realize through social media that we shared similar senses of humor.

While getting further acquainted over pizza and drinks, the topic of politics came up. The couple had figured out from Facebook that I lean right in my views, just as I had gathered that they were lefties.

When the husband asked if I was a Republican, I explained that I am a conservative who *used* to be a Republican. He was unclear of the distinction, so I explained that conservatives generally believed in things like small government, free markets, moral decency, individual freedom, and personal

responsibility.

“Then what do *Republicans* believe in?” he asked.

I sighed before answering. “These days? Pretty much just pissing off liberals.”

Sure, my response may have been a bit cynical, but the truth is that it is incredibly difficult for even a righty like me to explain to an outsider what today’s Republican party stands for.

For years, I could point to the aforementioned principles, and have no trouble at all applying them to Republican policies and messaging. Today, I feel as though I’d have to twist myself into a pretzel to try and come up with any reasonable framing of Republican ideals.

And I’m clearly not the only person who is having a hard time with this.

If you listen to who I’ll still refer to as “media-conservatives” (for lack of an updated term) on *Fox News*, talk-radio, and many right-wing websites, you’ve probably noticed that they barely touch on the topics they talked about exhaustively during the Obama years.

Today, you’d be hard-pressed to find a serious discussion about the national debt or even the need for meaningful spending reductions. Sermons on the power of the free market have been replaced with rhetorical slogans like “jobs jobs jobs,” and reform ideas (of any kind) are extremely hard to come by. Sure, media-conservatives want the GOP to pass a healthcare bill, but there’s now a general disinterest (as there is from President Trump) in the details of any such legislation.

Instead, the key focus of top media-conservatives has been to hammer away at *angry liberals, liberals saying crazy stuff,*

and *liberal hypocrisy*. And they've taken great pride in doing this – especially the latter, every day denouncing the mainstream media's double-standards in how journalists and pundits react to, and report on, Trump-related stories.

Of course, such topics have always been part of the conservative media's arsenal (and they have plenty of material to work with), but never has the Right been so reliant on them to fill up airtime and website content. Heck, there are a couple of prime-time shows on Fox News (along with a good number of the network's commentators) that focus almost *exclusively* on liberal hypocrisy. The same goes for several conservative radio-show hosts, who talk about practically nothing else.

And more often than not, their criticisms are valid. For example, many of the same people who've expressed outrage over Trump's pardoning of Joe Arpaio (who is by no means the *good guy* that the president portrays him as), weren't nearly as upset over Bill Clinton's highly-controversial pardons (including Marc Rich), or Barack Obama's commutation of Chelsea Manning's prison sentence. Yes, this is textbook hypocrisy, and it should indeed be called out.

The problem, however, is when those identifying the hypocrisy of anti-Trump liberals use that hypocrisy as a literal *defense* of Trump's actions. This is called *whataboutism*.

Surprisingly, the Oxford English Dictionary recognizes the term, defining it as “the technique or practice of responding to an accusation or difficult question by making a counter-accusation or raising a different issue.”

Here's how it works in the context of our current political environment:

If a liberal criticizes President Trump for schmoozing up to Russian President Vladimir Putin, the conservative whataboutist will quickly respond with something like, “What

about when President Obama whispered to Medvedev that he'll have 'more flexibility' after re-election?"

Here's another example:

If a liberal calls on President Trump to stop blaming President Obama for "the mess he inherited," a conservative whataboutist's reply would be, "What about when Obama blamed Bush for the same thing?"

Again, these observations aren't wrong, but they're also not a valid defense of Trump (or a defense of anything for that matter). Yet, they're used by a lot of people on the Right as the *last word* when weighing in on these topics, thus the merits of the criticisms themselves are completely ignored.

Republicans and conservatives heavily (and rightfully) criticized these presidential pardons and commutations when they came from Democrats. We threw a fit when President Obama made that remark to Medvedev. We raked him over the coals whenever he'd blame Bush for something.

For the Right to now *defend* Trump when he does the same thing, simply by reminding people that *Democrats did it too*, is in itself hypocrisy.

Yet, this has become the Right's *de facto* defense of practically *everything Trump* – the weapon of choice for media-conservatives and keyboard commentators on the Internet. They wield it with smugness, not realizing (or perhaps not caring) that by condoning conduct from Trump that they condemned from liberals, they're saying that their criticisms the first time around were utterly phony. Additionally, by doing this, they're sending out the message that the Right has no moral or ethical high-ground from which to judge the Left.

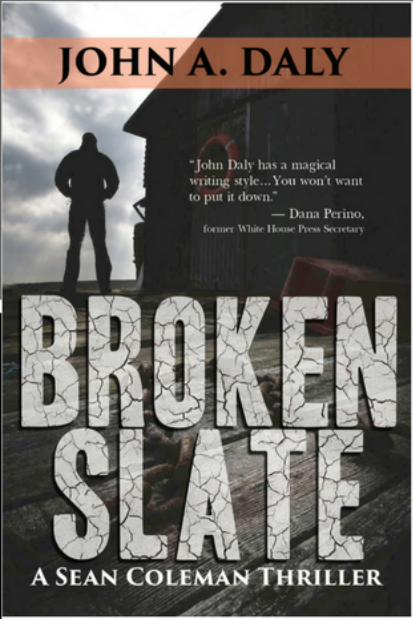
Aren't we supposed to be the *better* alternative? We certainly used to think so.

The Right's enthusiastic embrace of whataboutism isn't just a troubling trend. It's a symptom of a once-unifying philosophy being drained of its soul. If arguments can't be backed by principle or consistent logic, how can they be interpreted as anything other than heckling?

Is that the future of the political Right or perhaps even the Republican party: a band of hecklers, stuck in perpetual deflection-mode, content with simply tormenting liberals? I sure hope not.

For the sake of Republicans, the waning conservative movement, and more importantly the country, I'd love to see people on my side of the ideological divide stand for something meaningful again. Pointing out double standards requires no special talent, but there is virtue and integrity that come with maintaining your own standards, and being able to put forth a persuasive, cogent argument.

Heckling can be an effective weapon at times, but it can't advance anything of substance.




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