



## Us Against Them

By John C. Goodman

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Have you ever noticed that when members of Congress argue with each other on national television, they do more than just disagree? They invariably seem to describe their opponent's position using very different language than their opponent uses.

For example, a conservative's support for pro-growth tax cuts becomes "tax cuts for the rich" to a liberal opponent. A liberal's case for investing in people becomes "wasteful, big-government spending" to a conservative.

I once viewed these word twists as a mere debater's ploy. But then I came to realize much more is involved. There are quite a few liberals who actually believe their opponents want nothing more than to cut taxes for the rich. There are more than a few conservatives who really believe that liberals favor wasteful government spending as such.

Psychologists might call this "projection." Instead of trying to understand what other people are trying to say, the projector imposes his own world view on others — in effect, assuming that everyone else sees the world the same way he does.

I assume something like this goes on in the minds of many sports fans. They act as though they have something in common with the athletes they root for. The home team winning becomes a surrogate for local values, customs and mores triumphing over foreign values, customs and mores. In reality there is no connection at all between the fans and the athletes other than the fact that the home team pays the players' salaries.

There is a difference between football and politics, however. In football it doesn't really matter who wins. In politics, it does matter. If you are at all rational, you want good policies to win out over bad ones.

You would think that academics whose professional job is to approach the world as scientists would be immune from the psychological tricks people play on their own minds. But you would be wrong. Academics can be among the worst offenders.

Writing at Health Affairs the other day, Princeton University economist Uwe Reinhardt described the current budget impasse in Washington by declaring that this country has been in:

A long ideological war fought over the distribution of economic privilege in this country, a war

that has been raging unabated for over three decades now.

One side in this war believes that the current distribution of income and wealth in this country is fair, as it rewards generously those who contribute commensurately to the economy and properly gives short shrift for those who do not — e.g., unskilled workers...

The opposing faction believes that the current distribution of income and wealth no longer is the product of a genuine meritocracy, and even if it were, that health care, education and legal care are so-called social goods to which rich and poor should have access on roughly equal terms, regardless of their own ability to pay.

Is this your understanding of what the fight is all about? It's certainly not mine. I'll save health care for another day and take up education.

There has indeed been a three decade struggle — involving hundreds of millions of dollars spent on referenda, lobbying, court cases and elections. Just about every large city in every state in the country has been in the thick of the battle, including Washington, D.C., the one city that is controlled by Congress.

Hardly anybody in this struggle uses words like “equality” or “distribution of privilege,” however. This struggle is all about liberating poor (mainly minority) children from bad teachers and bad schools. The specifics are varied. They involve taxpayer-funded school vouchers, privately-funded vouchers, public school choice, private school choice, tax credits for private schools, charter schools, etc.

In every case, the reformers are pitted against the teacher unions. The issue is always the same: are schools essentially a jobs program, serving the interests of the people who work there? Or is their primary purpose to serve children?

[I realize there are many other reform efforts underway, including massive spending by the Gates Foundation. These efforts generally are not controversial, however, and therefore involve no “struggle.” That’s because they almost never involve firing a bad teacher or closing a bad school. For that reason, noncontroversial reforms may amount to little more than throwing good money after bad.]

The three-decade-old school reform struggle is not partisan. It has attracted many people of good will. Some have been willing to spend millions of dollars of their own money on the effort, including the late Milton Friedman, the Nobel Laureate economist.

However, I would guess that 90% of all people actively involved on the reform side of the struggle are conservative Republicans. The opposing teachers’ unions give almost all their campaign contributions to Democrats. When the Washington, D.C., voucher issue came to a head in Congress, the Obama administration sided with teachers against students, along with almost all the Democrats on Capitol Hill.

I mention these partisan factors only because of Uwe’s very strong implication that the political

left in this country supports equal educational opportunity while the political right does not. Not only is that observation wrong, if anything the reality is quite the reverse.

Not only has the political left consistently supported unions against kids, I find no evidence of a belief in equal educational opportunity in their personal lives. Is there any liberal Democrat in Congress who sends his/her children to D.C. public schools? Or do they all send them to the very private schools to which they would deny poor children admission by means of a voucher?

What about liberal professors at Ivy League universities. Where do they send their children to school? Do they select institutions of privilege? Or do they send their children to the same schools ordinary parents do?

Most conservatives in this country do not profess to believe in equal educational opportunity. They're not hypocrites. But many of them have been willing to give inordinate amounts of time and money in an effort to liberate those at the bottom of the income ladder from poor quality schools.

These days, the folks on the right are not the ones standing in the schoolhouse door, telling poor minority children they cannot come in.

The ones doing that are at the other end of the political spectrum.