

EDITOR'S NOTE

Anger was the unexpected story of the summer of 2009. At town hall meetings organized across the country so that legislators might “dialogue” with their constituents about a pending health care bill, congressmen faced a barrage of wrath and invective. Startling YouTube clips showed huge crowds jeering at politicians’ calls for trust in their statesmanship. The Solons of the Left were bemused. After all, the conceit of liberals is that they stand with the people against the powerful. Here, the people were standing up to them. Obviously, this anger could not be something authentic: it must have been ginned up by nefarious “special interests.” Apparently, the wrong sorts of people had been engaged in “community organizing.”

Even if we reject this convenient dodge and accept widespread popular anger as genuine, we must still ask: Whence comes this anger? Health care legislation seems an unlikely spur to visceral emotions. While doctoring surely cuts to the quick, health care as a policy matter conjures rather thoughts of paperwork, co-pays, and general tedium. It is a cause for dismay, not ire. One suspects, therefore, that the health care debate is merely the occasion to express a more general discontent. Amidst a recession brought on by a bubble of illusory, highly leveraged growth, Americans recoil at a liberal administration blithely leveraging the prosperity of future generations for ideological ends. Economically, America must get its house in order: a sober business. It is not a time for the intoxication of grand transformations. Yet with every passing day, new trillions of thoughtlessly enacted government liabilities pile up.

Nevertheless, anger ill becomes conservatives. At least, anger untempered by civility. Conservatives are committed to deliberative government—to civil argument about the common good, with *reasons* advanced for public debate. Spectacle and the mobilization of mere sentiment are the province of political movements that have nothing to say, no arguments to advance: they are attempts to achieve political victory without reason or reasonableness. Often, they are the tools of the Left—as we have seen with the financial fear-mongering of the past year, fear being the enemy of cool judgment. If conservatives have come to this, then the epitaphs to their movement are apt.

Of course, conservatives have *many* arguments to offer—especially when it comes to economic questions. Their arguments now mostly fall on deaf ears. And there lies perhaps the most important lesson we must learn. For decades, conservative scholars challenged received views of the Great Depression and the New Deal—and of economic history more generally. The immediate resort to Keynesian statism in the wake of the Panic of 2008 vividly reveals that the conservatives’ history remains, to the public mind, a mere dissenting opinion and not the truth of the matter. Yet without historiographic success—good history driving out bad—every political victory is merely ephemeral. So too is every political defeat. Conservatives must measure success in the long run. As a result, theirs is a project which above all requires not anger, but dispassionate scholarship.

—Mark C. Henrie