

Letters to a Conservative Friend

From: Ken J—
Sent: Tuesday, October 19, 2004
To: Doris L Hamill
Subject: Your Perspective on Debates, Election

Hello again, Doris.

I trust life is treating you well. Work and life remain quite satisfying here in Huntspatch.

If you have a minute, I'd love to hear your perspective on the Presidential debates and the election in general. Thanks for whatever time you have available if any and...

Have a great day,
Ken

From: Doris L Hamill
Sent: Tuesday, October 19, 2004
To: J—, Ken
Subject: Re: Your Perspective on Debates, Election

Hello, Ken,

Glad to hear your life is running okay.

My life is going okay – the normal ups and downs. Things with NASA sure are crazy (no news). They recently reorganized Langley; my branch went from about 10 people to about 50 (including contractors and co-ops). I'm genuinely not sure how to manage such a big group.

What can I possibly say about the political situation that you can't guess? If you, on the other hand, can enlighten me on why anyone in his right mind would vote for Bush, that's an argument I'd love to hear. All I've heard from Bush supporters is vituperative and name calling against Kerry, with no defense of a record that seems to me utterly indefensible.

I recently went back to reread the letter I sent to my senators and congressmen before the Iraq invasion; it had a lot of the same arguments that I wrote to you in that timeframe. Everything I said in that letter has proven to be right on: poor rationale; need for international cooperation; danger of instability and insurgency afterwards; immorality of using violence when ends can be achieved by other

means. Sheesh! I'm no foreign policy genius, yet I saw it all before hand.

All the best to you and the family.

Doris

From: Ken J—
Sent: Wednesday, October 20 2004
To: Doris L Hamill
Subject: Your Perspective on Debates, Election

Thanks for responding, Doris.

My most fundamental concern in this campaign is how both parties are wrenching our culture apart in the quest for those last few undecided votes – much more forcefully than in past campaigns. There appears to be very little middle ground on issues espoused from either side of the political spectrum. Secondly, add to that the distortions on issues used by both parties to denigrate the other candidate to the point that my oldest son told me, “Dad, I don't believe what either of them are saying.” If only the debates could be limited philosophically to genuinely answering the questions with their plans for the future and not attacking their competitor.

On a personal level, as you can guess I feel much the same way as you but from the opposite perspective. Given the chasm of disparate convictions, any attempt for either of us to convince the other is likely a wasted effort. I can say this though, we will be glued to the TV late on November 2nd, the majority of that time spent on our knees.

Have a good one,

Ken

From: Doris L Hamill
Sent: Wednesday, October 20, 2004
To: J—, Ken
Subject: Re: Your Perspective on Debates, Election

Ken–

Campaigns are too ephemeral and contrived to wrench culture. It is the three and a half years between campaigns that form culture.

Similarly, middle ground is not to be expected in a campaign. It is found when people in office sit down with and try to understand each other, then construct compromises. This means almost by definition that stands on "principle" are not middle ground, because principles are not open for negotiation. Among my most serious and overarching concerns with the Bush administration is that every issue seems to be a matter of principle. Perceived opponents, whether they are members of the United Nations, congressional democrats, environmentalists, or even scientists, have been locked out of the discussion. Once ideologues decide something is a matter of principle, they don't see anything to discuss.

This, then, leads to the fallacy that the moral rightness of a motivation justifies any means. In my view, means and motivation are separate moral tests, (consequences are a third, separate moral test, but more difficult to apply in prospect,) and an act must pass all its tests before we can say unequivocally that it is good. For example, let us say that Saddam Hussien is (was) an evil and dangerous person; let us further grant that removing his ability to cause harm is a morally laudable motivation. This does not itself justify immoral means for removing him. This does not itself excuse evil in the harm that the means of removing him may inflict. It is not morally consistent to be to take a principled stand on motivation and a pragmatic stand on means and consequences.

So how does this praying thing work, in your world view? If you pray for a Bush victory and Kerry wins, does that mean that God really wanted Kerry to win all along, or that the devil overpowered God this time? If you pray for Bush to win, and he wins, and then the economy continues to stagnate, civil rights continue to be undermined, our international prestige declines yet more, the country becomes yet more politically polarized, the budget deficit continues to grow, the environment becomes yet more foul, and we find ourselves further entangled in messy, no-win situations overseas, does that mean that God is using Bush to punish us for our cultural evil in some sort of an Old Testament vendetta (like Noah's flood) for our own good? I genuinely don't understand.

You see, Ken, in my view God is not an outsider, an on-looker who occasionally reaches across eternity to tweak the course of human affairs. God is within us all and acts through us. God acts through individuals by implanting in their souls a sense of rightness, but T-H-E big problem of human morality is learning to distinguish this feeling of spiritual rightness from the instincts and impulses that derive from our body, which also brings a sense of rightness but results in evil consequences. (I don't believe in a personified devil; I believe that our evil traces to our animal nature.) We train our will to distinguish moral right from biological impulse by using our intellect to observe and assess the consequences of actions we thought were right but had evil consequences. For example, we thought we were right to fight in Vietnam because our motivation was noble – free the people and stop the spread of Communism, which are good things. We

came to see that the means and consequences of our morally righteous motivation led directly to enormous evil. Those who mastered this lesson turned up the gain on the voice within them that counseled the importance of peace, the voice of God within them (“blessed are the peace-makers”), and turned down the gain on the voice of our animal nature that strives for dominance by any means at any provocation, the impulse to lash out with violence.

So we make our own heaven or hell right here on earth. If we as a society consistently make moral decisions, we are rewarded with peace, prosperity, comity, and justice. If, on the other hand, we look around ourselves and see war, poverty, polarization, and oppression, we are right to conclude that, perhaps inadvertently, we have mistaken animal drives for moral motivations. We need to use our intellects to trace through cause and effect to find out where we went wrong, then adjust the gain of the God voice within us. Thus God acts in the world through *our* free will.

Lunch is over. Back to the rock pile.

Take care, now.

Doris

[Lost correspondence: Ken asks for my impressions of the political situation in the 2008 primary season. Ken says he's praying for a victory by Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee.]

2/6/08

It is good to hear from you, Doris.

I truly miss the balance our interaction provided me in the past. I have no similar friends now and am concerned I'm losing touch with the liberal mindset. Given the candor you used in your responses, I'll respond with the same...

Yes, I know my omniscient, all powerful, holy yet compassionate God works through feeble humans to accomplish His will, particularly in answer to prayer. Acceptance of any part of the Bible is a matter of faith and answered prayer is one of its basic tenets. If in this election Obama or Clinton wins, we can count on a quick withdrawal and quick defeat in Iraq, complete loss of respect from terrorists worldwide with escalating attacks worldwide as a result, many more babies (fetuses) aborted adding to the 50,000,000 children slaughtered since Roe vs. Wade, equal rights for gay persons and gay marriages, and onerous environmental regulations which try and address the *Theory* of global warming, each further choking American industry while other major (still labeled third world) economies remain outside such restrictions.

If some of these areas are pushed even further based purely on intellect, I can see our culture will degenerate and disappear the way of the Romans and countless other past dominant civilizations. Lafayette said that America is great because America is good. America is no longer even trying to be good by a Biblical definition. As proven by history, "good" defined entirely by intellect is a leaf in the wind governed only by the morays (*sic*) of the day, descending generally downward to the abyss of complete selfishness and decay.

Now, to more constructively address some of your points, I completely agree the political process at the national level is far too polarized mainly because the leadership of *Both* parties are focused more on their selfish political futures than constructive compromise, assuring the future of those that elected them. I agree that for eight years the Republican leadership and their Democratic colleagues were fiscally irresponsible. Has that changed with the new Congress? The Democrat leadership just piled the FY-08 federal budget into just one morass of omnibus legislation, allowing even less visibility into both parties fiscal irresponsibility. The war, poverty, polarization, and oppression you mention are international in scope and confirmation in some people's minds that current events and cultural decay are leading to that promised in the book of Revelation. Already in Canada it's illegal for a pastor to quote from the book of Romans

which clearly states the gay lifestyle is categorically wrong. Comparable hate crimes legislation has been defeated in the US Congress several times. I'm genuinely concerned that my own children will be put in jail for voicing their Scriptural beliefs, in direct conflict with the free speech provisions of our nation's Constitution.

Finally, yes, I honor and respect our current President and pray for him often. In fact, as a Navy Reservist I respected President Clinton as Commander-in-Chief and prayed for him too, even though I disagreed with his positions on social and other issues. Much remains to play out in this year's election; I've enjoyed following it more than any other. Thanks for responding and...

May God continue to bless America,
Ken

Hi, Ken—

You didn't answer my tag questions: "Did you get what you prayed for when you prayed for Bush?" All the things I offered as hypothetical back in 2004 "...economy continues to stagnate, civil rights continue to be undermined, our international prestige declines yet more, the country becomes yet more politically polarized, the budget deficit continues to grow, the environment becomes yet more foul, and we find ourselves further entangled in messy, no-win situations overseas..." did indeed come to pass. What a surprise! So you prayed for Bush and Bush won. How shall we interpret this?

- 1) God made or allowed Bush to win in order to punish us.
- 2) God made or allowed Bush to win but didn't know he was going to screw up so badly.
- 3) It would have been worse if the other guy had won. (Hard for me to imagine. The current health of the country is as bad as anything I've seen in my lifetime. No, this is not typical of what America has been in the past. It is not typical of what is going on in the world today. It is a direct consequence of decisions Bush made. Details on request.)
- 4) God really doesn't care about American politics. He has ceded our fate to our own keeping so that we will bear the consequences of our choices.

Number 4 is the only one that makes any sense to me. In which case praying for Huckabee is not likely to interest God either.

(BTW, did you notice that the states that went for Huckabee on Super Tuesday all got hit by a killer tornadoes that same night? As one who believes that God neither cares about American politics nor decides who to hit with tornadoes, I'm perfectly willing to say that it was just a coincidence. You?)

Global warming, my friend, is a fact. You cannot make it go away by calling it a theory. In the 1980's, I was among the skeptics. Since then I have followed the

scientific debate in detail. I have seen the data. All my objections have all been answered. The only way to deny this mountain of high quality evidence is to deny science as a legitimate enterprise first to last. As an engineer, you make your living taking advantage of the knowledge that science has brought the world. To deny science is to deny your own vocation. Whether the remedies for global warming are onerous or stimulative is a matter of how we choose to implement them. Whether China and India come along or not, we have a moral duty to fix the mess we made these last 200 years.

Why ever should you sneer at “intellect?” Most of the best things you have – your technology, your health, your standard of living, your creature comforts – are all children of intellect in the service of humanity. Let’s review the sweep of history for just a moment. Until the 17th Century or so, most of the world was governed by religious principles. Poverty, ignorance, oppression, and poor health were the daily lot of the vast majority of people everywhere. Then, in the West (as a result, BTW, of the fracturing of the religious monopoly that came about because of the Reformation), a movement that became known as “the Enlightenment” argued that we ought to be relying less on religious belief and more on scientific observation and reason, in short on “intellect”. Suddenly, over the course of less than a century, progress exploded as never before in human history, and as nowhere else in the world. Adam Smith’s “intellect” gave us capitalism. Locke’s, Montesquieu’s and Voltaire’s “intellect” developed the ideas for a modern democracy that our founding fathers used. Beccaria’s “intellect” formulated the role of government and the rule of law that we understand today. Newton’s “intellect” opened new visions on the natural world. The history of Western progress is the history of the triumph of intellect.

Your notion of an American tradition of moral goodness is romantic but not well supported by the historical record. In the time of, say, Lafayette, America was still a slave-owning society, with the full measure of cruelty and exploitation that slavery necessarily involves. Americans liked their liquor, a lot. A favorite form of recreation in the American backwoods was “wrestling”, with biting and eye-gouging allowed, and of course wagering on the fights. With the exception of a couple of pockets in cities like Boston, Americans weren’t terribly religious. They lived in isolated farms around small villages that couldn’t support clergy. In his letters, Washington complained about the poor quality and absenteeism of his chaplains. The chaplains complained about the drunkenness, profanity and “sabbathbreaking” of the soldiers.

It grieves me, Ken, to see your normally happy spirit so encumbered by cynicism and paranoia. I have not an iota of fear for your children being able to practice whatever beliefs they have in perfect safety. We liberals don’t have anything whatsoever to say against you practicing your faith. We draw the line at having *our* behavior governed by *your* belief. If you believe that homosexual intercourse is wrong, then don’t do it. If you believe that a fetus has a human soul, then don’t kill it. But don’t force me to conform *my* behavior to *your* beliefs. If I believe that

homosexual intercourse can be an act of genuine love just as heterosexual intercourse can (which, by the way, I do), there's no reason that your contrary belief should influence my behavior. If I believe that a fetus does not possess a human soul but is instead merely a lump of tissue, then your belief about the subject should not affect my behavior.

The state has the responsibility to make laws that affect the good order of society, not private morality. It is the role of religion to support the private morality of its adherents. If religion helps its adherents lead a moral life, I am for it 100%, no matter how I might disagree with the beliefs on which it is based. For example, I think that the Moron beliefs about the golden tablets and the Book of Mormon are nigh on ridiculous, but I have to say that every Mormon I have ever met has been an exceptionally fine person, so who am I to scoff at golden tablets? Morality is hard enough. We need all the help we can get.

I simply don't know where you get your distorted views of liberals. I think someone is trying to scare you, to manipulate you for their purpose. I guess they succeeded. I tell you most sincerely, we liberals don't care a whit what you believe. It would be fine with us if you believe in the tooth fairy. When we feel threatened by religionists, (which, by the way, we do), its because they seem to want to use the power of the state to foist their religious beliefs on us. History has proven beyond question that this is a poor way to govern a society. (Details on request.) That's why we liberals want church and state to move in different spheres, not to repress the church but to free it to serve different people differently, according to what each individual needs to be moral.

I close with a quote from an evangelical preacher (I forget who) who as recently become disillusioned with the Republican party: "When you mix religion and politics, you get politics." If you value your religious freedom, keep it far, far away from the clutches of the politicians.

Doris