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Of Hedgehogs & Foxes

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Distinctly Catholic

Sir Isaiah Berlin begins his justly famous essay on Tolstoy by invoking a fragment of poetry found in Athens and attributed to Aeschylus. The fragment read: "The fox knows many things; the hedgehog knows one big thing." Berlin then goes on to categorize certain great contributors to Western civilization based on whether they were foxes or hedgehogs, whether they pursue many ends or relate all ends to a central objective or theme, whether their ideas exhibit centripetal or centrifugal tendencies, whether they are pluralists or monists. Among the foxes, Berlin puts Shakespeare, Herodotus, Aristotle, Montaigne, Erasmus, Moliere, Goethe, Pushkin, Balzac and Joyce. Among the hedgehogs, he places Dante, Plato, Lucretius, Pascal, Hegel, Dostoevsky, Ibsen and Proust.

These differing cast of minds have nothing to do with other ideological dispositions or intellectual affinities. Augustine was clearly a hedgehog and Aquinas was clearly a fox, but both men were orthodox, while we could say that Luther was a hedgehog and Calvin a fox, and neither maintained Catholic orthodoxy. Both Franklin Roosevelt and Bill Clinton were liberals, but Roosevelt was a hedgehog and Clinton a fox. Bush pere was a fox but Bush fils was a hedgehog.

Indeed, it can be argued that the current policy positions of the two parties are better seen in terms of the hedgehog v. fox divide than between liberal and conservative understandings. Liberals today are seemingly unconcerned about conscience protections, which was one a traditional liberal concern, even a foundational one. Conservatives used to resist government intrusion in private life, but now they only voice concern when it is corporations that are being regulated, not bedrooms.

The debate over our intervention in Libya has exposed clearly what was becoming apparent already: President Obama is the quintessential fox and his opponents are exemplary hedgehogs. The President sees problems to be, if not solved, attended to, and he does not worry overmuch about whether or not his

attentions meet with some coherent, central, unified ideal. Today's GOP and its mouthpieces at Fox are convinced of one central thing, whatever Obama is for, they shall be against. It is not much of a vision to be sure but it does not lack for consistency.

There is a deeper central idea that unifies today's GOP and it is the reverse of FDR's central theme. FDR thought that effective government action could be a force for good in society. Today's Republican Party is united around the idea that there is no such thing as effective government action and, so, it can only be a force for ill. At water's edge, of course, they take a different course as the situation suits them, arguing at times for the application of U.S. force and other times harkening back to a more isolationist stance. But, what unites the GOP today is opposition. In this, they are hedgehogs.

This hedgehog quality has its usefulness. During World War II, Britain was blessed to have a hedgehog at the helm in Winston Churchill who had been wrong about everything in his political career, but got the one big thing right: Hitler was to be resisted with all the might at the nation's disposal. Indeed, hedgehogs may be better suited to times of crisis, especially existential crisis, when it really is necessary to subordinate all other concerns to the main issue. Today's Republicans understand this which is why talk radio hosts and FOX news commentators are always whipping up a sense of panic, stoking the flames of fear, creating a portrait of imminent doom.

In fact, the nation is better served in our time, and with the issue that we face, with a fox in the Oval Office. The situation in Libya and other nations touched by the Arab Spring entail conflicting objectives: We want to support democracy in the region but we must be mindful of our interests and of those of our allies, some regime opponents appear more trustworthy than others (although the absence of anti-American sentiment on the Arab street has been a happy surprise for everybody), and we must try to balance the inevitably messy emergence of democracy with the need for some semblance of stability in a region that could easily turn into a tinderbox.

The same holds for domestic issues. "Drill baby, drill" is a slogan not an energy policy. Cutting government spending may sound like a good idea, but some government spending helps spur economic growth while other truly is discretionary. Lower taxes is a fine idea except when the nation faces long-term fiscal challenges that warrant a tax code that is both more equitable and more productive of government revenue.

Obama's challenge is that hedgehogs have a great advantage when it comes time to explain themselves. Foxes have difficulty articulating catchy themes that are not vacuous: "Change" and "Hope" were the mantras of Obama's 2008 campaign, but lacking any specific content, he has been unable to relate his central policy initiatives to a more specific central theme of the kind the electorate can seek its teeth into.

The GOP's challenge is that governance of a complex society requires at least some of the traits the fox has at his disposal. Certainly foxes do better at achieving legislative compromises than hedgehogs and, now that they share power in Washington, the Republicans need more than slogans, they need specific policies and specific legislative strategies. A Speaker or a Majority Leader who is a hedgehog is a Speaker or a Majority Leader doomed to fail.

Berlin's essay concluded that Tolstoy was a fox who desperately wanted to be a hedgehog. The best thing for America's future would be for some Republicans to get in touch with their inner-fox and for the President to become thinking a bit more like a hedgehog. But, I fear that such core dispositions are rooted in something deeper than the headlines, and that the fox can no more turn himself into a hedgehog than a Tea Partyer can comfortably become a regular on Rachel Maddow. Still, all are advised to read up on their Tolstoy.

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