

The Harbour League



AN UNRAVELING FABRIC

By Jeffrey Ferguson

The news is full of reports of questionable ethics and legal gymnastics. Daschle, Geithner, Killefer, Rangel – tax avoiders and scofflaws; Madoff – fraud; Wall Steeters – cheats and greedy individuals who can only think of lining their own pockets; Dodd – favored status for a sweetheart deal; Frank – orchestrating a quasi-private/public entity into dubious deals and dooming it to a long-term failure. It is enough to make you grab for medicine to settle your stomach. Much of this behavior has pushed us into the biggest economic crisis that our country has faced since the 1930's. We desperately need some statesmanship in the Congress. What do we get? We get excuses of oversights or honest mistakes (with the exception of the private sector types who are just dirty rotten no-goods), and a bloated package of spending programs that cow tows to the multitude of vocal minority groups who want their cause addressed with some money. Forget about bettering the whole society. Feed my cause. Address my issue. Whether it will address the true economic crisis that we face is at best questionable.

The media's reaction to all of this is to focus on the fact that they either didn't pay the taxes they should have or own up to the deals they struck or were part of (which were usually to their personal benefit). If the position they were being appointed to is a cabinet position or if they are in a leadership position in Congress, then swallow hard and let it slide. Geithner passed his Senate hearing with only the mildest of rebukes. We were told that he was too valuable and smart not to have him serve as Treasury Secretary. Meanwhile, a former Treasury Secretary sits as the chief economic adviser to the President. Daschle would have passed through his hearing citing his vast legislative experience which would be invaluable to passing health care reform. Righteous indignation from Dodd allows him to not address his sweetheart deal. Personally, I find all of this as repugnant as the next person, but I think that the issues are bigger than what is being reported and discussed by the political pundits. I think that the very fabric of our society is being unraveled and torn apart.

Why do I say this? Our founding fathers always espoused equality and having a society where everyone played by the same rules and had to live under the same microscope as the next person. It has always been whispered that two sets of rules existed – one for the elite, and another for the rest of the society. We all thought that this was the case, but we really didn't know. Once in a while, there might have been something in the news that showed that there might be a double-standard, but it wasn't constant. Now we have it front-and-center, in your face. The "patriotic duty we have to pay our taxes" is only for the plebeians, not the patricians of our society. The fabric that holds a democratic society together is a feeling that there is voluntary compliance with the existing rules and regulations. Our society, a democratic society, requires the feeling that we are all in this together. We participate together in working to address our collective issues and problems. We have succeeded because of the teamwork that accrues from considering what is best for the whole, not just the individual. How do we get people to report their income and pay taxes on it if we know that the leaders don't? How do we get people to comply with not only the laws, but also the spirit of the laws when they see that others don't or won't?

The result of this is and will be wider-spread cynicism and resentment. The common folk know that they will be fined and possibly jailed for noncompliance, if caught, while the patricians get a wink and a nod from the powers that be. I can't help but feel that there will be an increase in activity trying to avoid tax compliance; and why not? If these people don't have to comply, why should I will be a common feeling.

So what do we need done to fix this? I see this as a cry for ethical and moral leadership starting at the top of all of our institutions. The President can set a standard here. Rather than just rhetoric, use this as a time to set a higher standard. No one individual is so important that they shouldn't be either removed or asked to withdraw because of ethical lapses. If the President enforced this type of standard, perhaps Congress would get the message and begin to clean up its own cesspool. Each party takes care of and protects its own whether they deserve it or not, and most of them don't deserve this protection. If party leaders saw the President enforcing moral, ethical and legal standards, then perhaps this would begin to permeate the Congress and, ultimately, the other organizations of our society. It may sound Pollyannaish, but if standards don't emanate from the top of all of our organizations, the fabric will continue to unravel into chaos.

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