



BY PETER GOETTLER

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Red Sox versus Yankees (Political Version)

While delivering a keynote address at the celebration of Cato's 40th anniversary on May 6 (more details in the next issue of *Cato Policy Report!*), George Will paid the Institute a wonderful compliment. Said he, “Connoisseurs of football want to go to Lambeau Field in Green Bay; connoisseurs of college basketball want to go to the Palestra in Philadelphia; connoisseurs of baseball want to go to the corner of Clark and Addison in Chicago to Wrigley Field; and connoisseurs of liberty want to go to the corner of Massachusetts and 10th in Washington, D.C.” Most of you will recognize these last coordinates as the locale of Cato HQ at 1000 Massachusetts Avenue.

Who doesn't love sports analogies? So let's keep 'em going. I recently heard a commentator liken the approach most take to the policy world to being a sports fan: your team, come what may. Namely, for many, their viewpoints aren't always informed by an underlying philosophy or a principled approach to policy, but rather by the dictates of their “team.” Such a view holds that, in these days of strong red team vs. blue team partisanship, identification with a particular group—and demonizing the political or policy “opponents” of that group—can take priority over adherence to specific policy views.

The generous Sponsors who make Cato's work possible and the dedicated professionals who work here are a principled bunch. Passionate about liberty, seeking to serve our national interest by limiting the power of the state and restoring the libertarian framework upon which our country was founded, Cato's community is dedicated to a liberty-focused philosophy and the policy positions it informs. It just doesn't occur to us that you'd change your principles for partisan reasons. But two years in Washington has taught me that tribalism is a huge factor in driving the political process and discourse. The analogy of politics as allegiance to a particular sports team has merit.

The first piece I ever wrote for *Cato Policy Report* commented on the fact that the philosophical thread holding together the various policy positions of our political parties often seems to be missing. This is particularly true in the inconsistent ways individual liberty and economic liberty are treated by each. The

partisan packaging of issue positions thus lacks a logical basis, and philosopher Michael Huemer of the University of Colorado labels this “political irrationality.” While of course driven by overall political considerations, he also cites the dynamics of group membership and identity as key factors in motivating and reinforcing this. Huemer maintains that most of our public policy challenges are not as complex or intractable as we make them out to be, and therefore cites political irrationality or tribalism as our biggest public policy problem since it can be considered the key obstacle in addressing all the others.

It's discouraging that the current environment, thick with hypocrisy, appears to be strengthening these tendencies. Republicans who have supported free trade all their lives now rationalize the need for a “level playing field,” since their team appears to have flipped—or at least developed a case of schizophrenia—on the issue. Democrats exercised the “nuclear” option to stack the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals ahead of the *King v. Burwell* case, but are now indignant that the same tool would be used by Republicans to seat Neil Gorsuch on the Supreme Court. And, of course, each team's zeal for investigation, fear of expanding executive power, and willingness to defend civil liberties waxes or wanes depending upon which controls the White House. The voters (or fans, to continue the analogy) shouldn't wonder why politicians continue to disappoint if they're unwilling to call their team to account—as so often needs to be done.

I don't mind living and dying with my sports teams—there's always next year, and the stakes, let's be honest, just aren't that high. But over my years as a Cato Sponsor, the most important lesson I learned from Ed Crane and David Boaz was, in the policy world, not to put undying faith in either team. If you believe the role of government is strictly limited and accept an expansive view of individual liberty, you'll have lots of disagreements with both teams. I think in the current environment, the intellectual honesty to which Cato aspires is a crucial—and potent—antidote to political tribalism and irrationality.