

# THE POISON OF EXTREMISM

## RESPONSIBLE CITIZEN SUMMARY

### Background

- Eight characteristics of extremists were identified in 2004 by Paul T. Mero.
- The recent immigration debate has motivated him to revisit the topic.

### What's at stake?

- Limited government – extremism increases calls for a police state to correct society's ills.
- Community – extremism divides mainstream society and discounts our interconnectedness.
- Prudence – extremism is fueled by irrational fears that lead to poor judgments and rash decision making.

### What's next?

- Responsible citizens must recognize and shun extremist tendencies.
- Utahns must think rationally and avoid the temptation to drum out proven conservative leaders based on one issue.

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Harsh tone and style define new right-wing extremism in Utah.

By Paul T. Mero

The rancor throughout the immigration debate has persuaded me to revisit the topic of political extremism in Utah. Nearly seven years ago, I spoke on this subject during a keynote session at Sutherland Institute's award-winning *Transcend Series*. I began those remarks that summer morning, in part, with this preface,

In its most simplistic form, an extremist is one who takes a position away from the mainstream view. Frankly, that is not always a bad thing. At the very least, this definition of extremism is always debatable and it is not the controversy I would like to address.

Instead, I would like to address aspects of extremism which are indisputable; the kinds of extremism seen by all and felt by all; extremism more about style than substance; representing an unnecessary spirit of contention rising to stifle public debate and civil discourse.

But before I revisit this topic, I think it's important to understand the unique role and function that Sutherland Institute plays in shaping the *culture* of politics in Utah.

As an independent public policy group, Sutherland Institute is able to say things that others, more sensitive to purely political matters, do not dare say. Such candor can be seen as a blessing or a curse. Either way, these opportunities are a responsibility we take seriously – we strive to match our candor with civility.

Sutherland is able to challenge orthodoxies as well as defend them. It is able to invoke time-tested principles unashamedly and without qualification. It also, very often, chooses to remain silent when silence reflects the better part of discre-

tion in helping public dialogues proceed. Its staff has worked, in prudence and within its legal framework, both behind closed doors and in the bright sunlight with policy makers.

Sutherland Institute is in the world of Utah politics, but not of it. Understandably, this position can create confusion about Sutherland's efforts in the minds of people whose civic filter is partisan, or worse. Sutherland's work is policy, not politics, yet it's required to labor in political fields. It seeks civility, not contention, yet it sometimes addresses deeply divisive issues that often test the lines of civility. It is intellectually and philosophically conservative, not concerned with political forms of conservatism (e.g., Republican Party politics).

Not surprisingly, the most contentious policy issues spotlight these paradoxes, and these issues also provide wonderful opportunities for Sutherland Institute to provide insights and clarity where both are needed.

Seven years of additional experiences have not altered many of my original thoughts, but the recent immigration debate certainly has sharpened them. I reaffirm my original remarks: Right-wing political extremism is alive and well in Utah. And, in furthering the mission of Sutherland Institute – in protecting the cause of freedom in Utah, constructively influencing policy makers, and promoting responsible citizenship – I am committed to fighting such extremism. I am also committed to using Institute resources in crafting public policies designed to mitigate extremism's harmful influence on the practices of responsible citizenship and the process of representative government.

This commitment alone may be seen as heresy, or even treasonous political behavior, among newly energized

activists (such as tea partiers). Nevertheless, with my long professional experience in politics and policy, and equally long history within the American conservative movement, perhaps I am among those Utahns who are well-qualified to address these matters.

And, so, I reiterate my previous remarks about right-wing extremism in Utah.

## THE 8 CHARACTERISTICS OF EXTREMISM

**A first characteristic is its self-righteousness.** There is a spirit of irredeemability attached to every act of disagreement it observes; a judgment of moral inferiority cast in every word from its mouth. Opponents of its causes, even those opponents merely in loyal disagreement, are viewed as harboring deficient character and void of good intentions. A contrary word is sign of a traitor. Such extremism

does not see social conflict as something to be mediated and compromised, in the manner of the working politician. Since what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, the quality needed is not a willingness to compromise but the will to fight things out to a finish. Nothing but complete victory will do. Since the enemy is thought of as being totally evil and totally unappeasable, he must be totally eliminated. <sup>1</sup>

**A second characteristic of right-wing extremism in Utah is its uncommonly angry mind.** All of us get angry at times; these extremists stay angry. Right-wing extremism in Utah is measured by its uncivil tone and, especially, its indiscriminate disregard for the common good – even as it justifies its disregard for democratic

processes in the name of “truth” and “principle.” Anger is its motivation. It awakes each morning eagerly anticipating what new enemies it will make to justify its activism. Angry children want to get their way regardless of circumstance and the feelings of others, and so do these extremists.

**A third characteristic is its self-absorbed patriotism.**

If only every citizen could hear the inspired political truth from its mouth, so the reasoning goes, it could save America, or Utah, or Mexican Hat. There are big differences between good people who speak out, or who volunteer in civic affairs, and self-appointed crusaders who crowd out the citizenship of others through the uncompromising insistence of their opinions.

**A fourth characteristic is its irrational speculation.**

It would be hard to categorize right-wing extremism as completely unintelligent. Any public servants on the receiving end of an extremist’s tireless pen would find themselves deluged in paper, argument after argument, reference after reference, citing minutiae and detail that would make an accountant squirm. But, at some point, fact begins to turn into fiction. Inevitably, it seems, everything is motivated by evil and conspiring minds.

Perhaps because of its angry mind or because of its self-righteousness, right-wing extremism has a persistent habit of turning the corner from objective fact to malicious fantasy. It attributes the most devilish of intents to the most innocuous of responses. A politician who changes her mind becomes a moral deviant rather than simply one exercising a thoughtful prerogative. Right-wing extremism holds to a linear view of the world around it. There is no room for the human experience. In this view, history is written by the evil hand of conspiring men and not simply by the indi-

vidual choices, both good and bad, made every day by billions of God’s children.

The sad effect of this “crying wolf” is that real evils and real conspiracies often get overlooked because the stridency and zealotry of extremism burdens society’s collective ability to discern wisely and rationally.

**A fifth characteristic of right-wing extremism in Utah is its exclusivity.** It is a segregated citizenry; it listens to nobody. It communes intellectually in isolation; anonymity is often its byline; and typically, its own citizenship is wholly conditional upon dutiful and undeviating acceptance of its every premise and conclusion.

This exclusivity, which ignores the trust required of a civil people in a healthy, functional society, leads to **a sixth characteristic of right-wing extremism: its disdain for democracy.** Trust in our fellow man is risky; he might not always do what we want him to do. Right-wing extremism hates the give and take of society. It hates that people are often irrational. It hates that mistakes are made and that corrections are hard to come by. It hates civil dialogue. It hates the risks that accompany freedom. Furthermore, it hates community and idealizes selfish individualism – in this sense of separation and exclusivity, right-wing extremism in Utah is not “conservative” at all.

**A seventh characteristic is its perversely worshipful view of our Founding Fathers.** While it, commendably, loves to identify with the Founders and invokes the Constitution at the drop of a hat (though, oddly, finds the Declaration of Independence largely irrelevant), it also reads revolutionary tracts and religious sermons of that era as modern-day scripture. It feels its experiences are identical to the revolutionary experiences of our Founders.

The problem with that view is that the Founders' experiences are only partially ours. The part that teaches us about self-government, reverence for a Higher Authority, moral virtue, and the passionate sentiment of those "who more than self their country loved and mercy more than life"<sup>2</sup> remain our shared experience.

The other part – the revolutionary part – is not our experience.

Let me be clear on this point: The freedom for which our Founders fought and died is our shared experience; the circumstances underlying for which they fought against are not. They fought against an internal tyranny that Americans have not seen since. Though rhetorical comparisons are often fun, and sometimes not without a momentary feeling of justification, Barack Obama is not King George III.

Read the Declaration of Independence. When was the last time this land was governed by a dictator? When was the last time our Congress and state legislatures were not allowed to convene or function? When was the last time America went without free elections? When was the last time a dictator, in Thomas Jefferson's language, "plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people"? When was the last time an American politician brought into our country "foreign mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation, and tyranny"?

Jefferson wrote in our Declaration that "whenever any form of government becomes destructive of [our Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness], it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it." Our Founders abolished a destructive form of government and created something new. Perhaps this fact is missed by the ex-

tremist mind: To abolish what now exists is only to destroy what their revered Founders created.

Let's not gloss over this: When the extremist mind works unreasonably, irrationally or imprudently, it works to "abolish" the roots of American order. Using principle to destroy process is no less tyrannous than using process to destroy principle – and to do so in the sacred name of our Founders is despicable, un-American behavior.

**The eighth and final characteristic of Utah's right-wing extremism is its selective disdain for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when the church's views contradict those of the extremists'**

There is no virtue in thinking that you, as an adherent, know more about a faith than the authorities appointed to govern and administer that faith. Self-appointed authority is no authority. And, again, there is no virtue in an adherent sacrificing "saving processes" in the name of "saving principles" – it is naïve to think that mortal processes, like governments, don't impact faith – when "working out our salvation" is such a complex partnership between principles and processes.

Disagreement between an adherent and his or her church over secular matters is far from heretical, but for an adherent to publicly challenge the doctrinal integrity of that church is more than heretical. Lecturing the LDS Church about its doctrine – such as "what don't you understand about the word illegal?" from the immigration debate in relation to the 12th Article of Faith – is not only pointless but, if done publicly, can be destructive to faith.

Politics can sift personal testimonies as much as any personal bad habit and perhaps even more among self-

righteous extremists. Brigham Young, with prescience, aptly described individuals with this modus operandi:

An individual with an abhorrence of evil joins the Church ... he sets himself upon the path to detect the failings of others, deeming that he is doing God a service in being so employed, and thus he is decoyed into the occupation of the great master of evil, to be the accuser of his brethren. And during this time thus occupied by him, he considers himself actuated by the purest of motives, arising from a detestation of sin. Yet, mark the subtlety of Satan in thus leading men into a false position. Such a course, in the first place, probably arose from the purest of motives, and perhaps the individual was instrumental in rectifying some error; he feels a satisfaction for having done so, his self-esteem is gratified, and ere he is aware, he is seeking for another opportunity of doing the same ... continually setting himself up as being capable of sitting in judgment upon others, and of rectifying by his own ability the affairs of the kingdom of God.<sup>3</sup>

Although it is unlikely that any single individual possesses all these characteristics, this is what I see as the pattern of right-wing extremism in Utah.

## AFTERWORD

Perhaps a reasonable person could say of these remarks, "It takes one to know one." Perhaps it does. And perhaps I am that person. In speaking for Sutherland Institute I have my own style and tone that often leans more toward candor than civility, rather than seeking their complementarity.

On Friday, March 11, 2011, *The Washington Post* ran an editorial on Utah's surprising progress with state-based immigration policy and quoted me saying, in part, "We've been able to break through that political barrier put up by the wing nuts who see every brown person as a criminal" – a comment after which I received a couple of emails challenging my civility for using the term "wing nut." Whether my use of that term was appropriate or not, or justified or not, I have to grin and shake my head. I am beyond incredulous that the use of the term "wing nut" is a public sin but the wholesale character assassination of an entire population of immigrants over the past three years is apparently justified.

I have written that the Arizona-inspired policy and legal exercise of seeking to round up and starve out more than 100,000 people living peaceably in Utah is "far from the 'God, Family, Country' mantle worn by its zealous crusaders ... this latest scapegoating of immigrants is ungodly, anti-family and un-American."<sup>4</sup> Pretty tough language, but it pales in comparison with the thousands of remarks left within the last year on newspaper comment boards – cruel comments that are fixated on capturing and deporting undocumented immigrants.

I can defend the "ungodly, anti-family and un-American" accusations fairly easily. Indefensible, it seems to me, are irrational accusations that an entire population of people is harmful to Utah. Such extreme claims are examples of nativism at best and racism at its ugliest.

Updating my previous characterizations of right-wing extremism in Utah, and using my reflections from the

immigration debate to do so, I would add three more thoughts to the list.

First, the ends seem to justify the means for these extremists. It seems that among them any argument can be made, any claim can be asserted, and if it's said loudly enough (usually followed by some random quote from a Founding Father), anything can be justified in their minds.

The role of Sutherland Institute throughout the public debate on immigration has been to educate citizens and lawmakers; to weed out hysteria, stereotypes, baseless anecdotes and degrading mischaracterizations; and to move the dialogue onto the grounds of reason and fact. In that spirit, permit me to reiterate that the ends *do not* justify the means, because the "ends," at least among Utah's grassroots Deportation Caucus, are typically based on logical fallacies and irrational claims.<sup>5</sup>

Second, right-wing extremists in Utah seemingly have no concept that ideas have consequences. Conservatism 101 begins with the opposite understanding – ideas do have consequences. But not once has any of these anti-immigrant activists explained just how more than 100,000 undocumented immigrants were physically to be rounded up and deported. Not once was I provided with an actual plan to commit the unthinkable – because, of course, that plan doesn't exist; because, of course, that plan would be inhumane and un-American; because, of course, it would involve a massive police-state effort, devastating families and costing millions of dollars.

My final point is this: Right-wing extremism is fueled by baseless and irrational fears. The entire argument

of anti-immigrant activists was based on fear. They fear crime. They fear joblessness. They fear devaluation of our economy, our culture and our education system. They fear everything. Those were the messages of the anti-immigrant activists. Not one rational or constructive solution, just fear-driven reactions.

The debate over HB 116 represented a cultural struggle – a culture of fear versus a culture of reason, hope, acceptance, prosperity, public safety and freedom. The good guys won, thankfully. But the fear-mongering continues with attacks on Utah's political leaders, not the least of whom is Governor Gary Herbert. Our governor is one of the most genuinely conservative lawmakers this state has ever known, but now he is apparently not "conservative" enough because he supported and signed HB 116 into law.

But why should I, or any reasonable conservative, be surprised by such embarrassing accusations? Illogic flows from irrationality.

In an op-ed published on April 30, 2010, in the *Deseret News*, just one month after Arizona passed SB 1070, I wrote,

**No one should be surprised that Arizona has acted independently in the face of federal inaction. I wholeheartedly support acting independent of federal inaction. What I don't support is the wholesale trashing of our American identity as freedom-loving people. Likewise, I wholeheartedly support the tea party movement. But make no mistake about it, the tea party movement in America will die if it continues to embrace anti-immigration nativism.<sup>6</sup>**

I see that happening now in Utah. Unfortunately, Utah's tea party movement is becoming ever more marginalized as it responds overzealously to state-based immigration reform and the political leaders who endorsed it. Extremism leads people to cut off their nose to spite their face. Oppose Governor Gary Herbert, or the majority of state legislators who voted for HB 116, or any elected official for any reason – that's a citizen's prerogative! But to base any political opposition to any of them who endorsed HB 116 on the premise that Gary Herbert and legislative leadership are not substantively and philosophically conservative is beyond reason.

I love Utah. I love its legacy. I love what it seeks to conserve in this age of modernity. And I pray that its people won't succumb to irrational fear, nativism, and political extremists who, wittingly or not, exploit such fears.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (Harvard University Press, 1963), 31.
2. Katharine Lee Bates, "America the Beautiful," 1893.
3. Brigham Young, *Millennial Star* 6: 165-166.
4. Paul T. Mero, "Utah should say no to Arizona-style justice," *Deseret News*, April 30, 2010.
5. See <http://www.sutherlandinstitute.org/immigration.php> for a thorough thrashing of those claims.
6. Mero, "Utah should say no to Arizona-style justice."



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