

"Policy Today" - There Is None

Contributed by Publisher, Dan Schwartz
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As Policy Today finishes its fourth year, one thing has become clear from the many conversations we've had with elected officials about "policy today"—there is none.

Yes, abundant think tanks, editorials, op-ed pieces, and politicians would suggest the contrary. And, as 2008 approaches, Americans will elect a President and other representatives, ostensibly reflecting "their position on the issues." Yet, all that without a principled vision of what we're trying to accomplish or a political structure that admits anything the pundits or candidates say will—or should—be implemented. All too many Americans have long since stopped caring. "That's politics," they shrug.

Obviously, we have a national government and elected officials, so there must be some motivating force, some compass to guide the decision-making process. Our reporting indicates that indeed, there is: trading "your bridge for my bike path," "my subsidy for your tax break," and extracting campaign contributions to where 50%-plus-one will support a given piece of legislation. Some argue that's how a democracy as large and diverse as the United States should work. Maybe so. If there's any good news, many of the leaders we spoke to agreed the system is broken, but seemed unable or—unwilling—to do anything about it. "It's all politics," they tell us with cheerful resignation.

Down the "Raq hole";

"Policy" suggests an overarching vision that knits together competing interests with some reference to established principles and priorities, not a grab bag of who gets what from the trough. We condescend to believe that "policy" is the province of the Chinese Communist Party, not of "the world's only remaining superpower."

Yet, for all its shortcomings on political freedom, China has stepped from the ruins of the Cultural Revolution to become the world's most dynamic and productive nation. At the same time, the United States has dug itself into a war we could never "win," massive debt, and an electoral system fueled by fundraising and TV advertising. We continue to find reasons to pour resources down the "Raq-hole," while our young people ship home in body bags, infrastructure collapses, and our public schools leave all too many graduates with little else beyond their Ipods, TiVo's, and an eighth grade equivalent education.

The logicians remind us that you can't prove a negative: why talk about transcendent objectives when citizens and politicians alike find the subject irrelevant if not downright irritating? We can't think of an answer other than British mountaineer George Mallory's when asked why he wanted to climb Mt. Everest, "Because it's there." (Mallory perished in his attempt the following year.) Or seconding Ted Turner's lament on losing \$9 billion as a result of the Time Warner — AOL merger: "better to be a 'has been' than a 'never was.'" More to come.