

The Perfect, the Good, and the Bad

by Bill Herbst

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An aphorism often invoked in public discourse, and particularly in politics, is:

"Don't let the perfect become the enemy of the good."

This aphorism is attributed to various famous individuals throughout history. Voltaire stated it as *"The best is the enemy of the good."* Confucius' version was *"Better a diamond with a flaw than a pebble without."* And Shakespeare put it this way: *"Striving to be better, oft we mar what's well."* As is the case with so many such truisms, the idea didn't originate with any of these cultural icons, of course. It's universal. No one owns the original patent, since the knowledge has always been in the public domain and available to everyone. No royalty payments required.

No matter what the particular formulation, the aphorism reflects a common-sense brand of practical wisdom, namely, that focusing obsessively on whatever we feel would be perfect too often works against our making progress toward what's good. Why? Demand for perfection undermines the sensible ambition to move forward by working to make things better incrementally, in steps. Insisting on nothing short of the perfect can blind us to any lesser but still worthwhile goal, removing the possibility of cooperation and compromise in negotiations with those whose opinions and beliefs differ, so that we risk achieving nothing.

All of that is fine. And true, as far as it goes. Like many aphorisms, however, the opposite can also be true.

As we count down the days until the 2020 election, the aphorism ("Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good") is invoked more and more often. Basically, it's used by centrist Democrats to convince further left-leaning members of the voting public to give in and vote for Joe Biden. The argument goes like this: Defeating Donald Trump is Job One. That's what matters most right now. In fact, it's the only thing that matters. If Trump gets another four years as President, we're screwed. Biden may not be perfect, but he's the only viable choice we have.

I understand the logic. I'm not entirely unsympathetic to the oh-so-human impulses behind it. But I'm not happy with the argument and don't trust or believe it as far as I can throw it.

The problem is that evil (meaning the bad) typically masquerades as good. The bad learned long ago that it has a better chance of hoodwinking the idiots and manifesting its fully despoiled badness if it pretends to be its opposite — the good. So, it adopts the wolf-in-sheep's-clothing strategy, the con man selling snake oil as medicine. Trump rode that lie all the way to the White House.

If you believe, as so many Americans do, that the Democrats stand for good, then the argument to not allow the perfect be the enemy of the good may seem compelling. I look back on the history of America over the past 40 years, and I don't see the Democrats that way. The Democratic party long ago succumbed to and then adopted neoliberalism, moving significantly to the right. Both the Clinton and Obama administrations provide ample evidence of that.

Clinton's political "triangulation" made him arguably a terrific "Republican" President. He supported NAFTA, ended welfare, and stood by as draconian law and order policies targeting blacks were put in place, which doubled the federal prison population. Meanwhile, the corporate industry of privately-owned, for-profit prisons made its wealthy shareholders even wealthier.

Similarly, Obama's "hope and change" didn't work out so well. Our first black President oversaw bailing out the big banks (with nary a single banker prosecuted), initiated the militant "Pivot to Asia" foreign policy, authorized increased spending to develop more sophisticated nuclear weapons, and approved drone warfare. Obama also deported more illegal aliens than any other President in history (including Trump). The Affordable Care Act, lauded as Obama's signature achievement, is a far cry from single-payer universal health care. Even in the throes of a deadly pandemic, universal health care for all Americans is still off the table and beyond the pale.

Defenders of both Presidents claim that such actions were necessitated by staunch Republican opposition in Congress, but I find that argument weak at best and downright specious at worst. The Dems like and are beholden to their big-money donors, just like the Repugs, and they've been eager and willing supporters of corporate America.

Basically, I'm drawn to the perspective that we have only one political party in America — the duopoly — that dominates all our elections and fills the offices of representative government. This party comes in two flavors: Republican and Republican-Lite. Each side supports the wealthy and works to maintain the American Empire. In America, those who have, get.

Consider the overwhelming support in both parties for authorizing the bloated annual budget for the military. For 2020, that amounts to \$740 billion. That's three-quarters of TRILLION dollars, and it passed easily, as it always does, every single year. Amendments to that budget were proposed this year in each chamber of Congress to cut Pentagon spending by a modest 10%. Both were soundly defeated, with no Republicans and far less than half the Democrats voting for the amendments.

Two parties? One for the rich and one for the people? Think again. One that believes in madness and another that believes in sanity? Nope, not a chance. The Republicans may be more brazen about what they stand for, but, with few exceptions, the Democrats have been willing if stealthy co-conspirators.

And so, what to do for someone like me? Vote for Biden? (in 2016, I held my nose and voted for Clinton, which I regret.) Avoid both major candidates and cast a protest vote for someone who won't get elected? (I've done that frequently, to no avail.) Don't vote at all? (I tried that once too.)

None of those three options pleases me. Right now, odds favor my voting for Joe Biden, but I'm not happy about it and won't defend it. Nor do I think Joe and the Dems will do much of substance to save us from what's coming. My bottom-line perception is that, despite COVID-19 and the collapsing economy, America isn't yet ready or willing to change in any of ways I consider minimally necessary. Yeah, we might get a Green New Deal from Biden, but it will be another boondoggle of corporate enrichment that fails utterly to stave off the ravages of catastrophic climate change. Yeah, we might get some social justice programs to "reform" policing, but they won't address our inherent violence or America's obscene wealth inequality. And we'll get nothing from the Dems that rethinks the consumer economy, challenges the financialization of everything, or curbs spending on the military. Those are all bridges too far. Way too far.

Put very simply, the country we inhabit doesn't want any of that. As a whole, Americans wish to continue unfettered pursuit of our demented, toxic fantasies. They may not be happy with their particular slice of the pie, but mostly they approve of the way we live. They like techno-toys, industrial agriculture, and American Exceptionalism. Debates will continue, of course, about which band-aids to put on the various grievous wounds we've caused and received, but none of those will stanch the bleeding. From where I sit, America, civilization, and humanity itself are all in for a very bad time. We're already far enough down that road of suffering that there's probably no realistic possibility of going back.

As I write often, though, I may be wrong about this. If I am wrong, that's good. If I'm right, however, I hope I won't be around to see the worst of it.

I'll close by affirming the wisdom of not allowing the perfect to become the enemy of the good. I think that's entirely reasonable. It ceases to be true, however, when the good is not truly good, or when the bad masquerades as the good. Examine whatever is advertised as good. Look hard at it. Look underneath it, around it, and past it. Consider where it came from and who's selling it to you. Is it really good or just another con? Is it worthwhile or merely snake oil? Or worse, poison?

If you decide it's good, then go for it. If not, don't buy it.