

SELF-INTERESTED POLITICS – October 2007

— By Richard L. Kiniry

It is amazing now quickly a bridge falling down can change people's attitude toward taxes. Before the bridge collapsed in Minnesota the Republican Governor and a large percentage of the citizens were dead set against raising taxes for infrastructure repair; following the disaster raising taxes quickly became the right thing to do.

Translating self-interest into community policy works in politics but is that the best way of running a society? Major disasters don't always work as an impetus to remedial action. New Orleans still sits in ruins because that disaster affected the "wrong kind" of people and did not arouse the self-interest of most of the population. Conversely, the paranoia of average self-interested Americans has us over-reacting and going to war against phantom enemies.

A society that depends on self-interest as the driving force for political action is in trouble. Certainly self-interest is always part of the motivation for political action, but our dependence on self-interest as impetus to action guarantees partial, unequal solution that must be repaired in the future. The American Revolution was an upper- and middle-class revolution. The high-minded Enlightenment ideas that legitimized the Revolution continue to thrill our hearts, but the reality was that the founding fathers were acting in their own self-interest. As a result, besides the evil of slavery, women's and worker's rights were left to another day. Social Security and Roosevelt's other New Deal programs were fought vehemently by the wealthy but it was a rare time when community interest surpassed self-interest. Of course, Roosevelt's programs saved capitalism for the wealthy.

So many of today's social, political, and cultural problems cry for solutions that will need self-sacrifice on the part of us average citizens. That self-sacrifice will be not only be financial. We also carry around opinions and positions that are mental constructs that defend us against any threat to our self-interest — such as the idea that we deserve a comfortable lifestyle or that our view on life is the only right one.

Every honest — yes, honest — solution to perceived problems must answer to multiple voices and interests. Too often solutions do not go deep enough into the source of problems because the self-interest of the middle-class might be threatened by facts. We have become used to ignoring legitimate demands that challenge our self-interested opinions or desires.

The best thing we can do to prepare for a better world is to encourage ourselves and others to look beyond our own self-interest. That is the necessary ground work to a healthy human community.