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IT'S A GRAY AREA: Classic liberal, conservative values

By **JAMES P. GRAY**

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While accompanying my wife shopping recently, I happened to see a friend of mine. This is a man who has been quite successful in his business career, and whom I met as one of the "powers that be" in the politically powerful Lincoln Club of Orange County. We began talking about the sorry state of our economy and several other matters when he made the comment: "I have harmed our formerly great system of public education."

Many people have made the truthful comment that our system of public education is failing our children, but I had never heard anyone take personal responsibility for that failure. Even though he has no more control over this system than any other taxpayer or citizen, I told him that I agreed with him, and, of course, felt that I was equally to blame.

Why is that? Because almost literally it is our school system, and if it is not working well it is our responsibility to make it right. Of course, the same thing is true regarding government projects in general.

We both went on to say that this failure has occurred "on our watch." In other words, it is our generation that has allowed our schools to become such an expensive failure. Similarly we have also allowed our government to borrow and spend itself into such enormous debt. But our generation will not be harmed particularly by what we have done. We will be fine. Instead it will be

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our children and grandchildren that will have to pay for our poor stewardship. In other words, shame on us!

So what should we do? My friend suggested that we should look back over our nation's history and determine what has made us strong. What are the values that have helped us to achieve our greatness? What were the choices we made that have worked, and how can we refocus upon our strengths?

That started me to thinking — always a dangerous thing for me to do. In my opinion, two basic things have contributed materially to the rugged individualism and work ethic that have made us strong.

Those things are individual freedoms, and justly and fairly regulated competition in the marketplace, and a system that always encourages people to earn the extra dollar. And the way we can best promote them is to ensure public safety, enforce property rights, public and private contracts, and civil liberties, and hold all individuals, partnerships, corporations and governments accountable for their actions.

Of course, this does not mean that we should go back to the jungle concept of the "survival of the fittest." But it does mean, all importantly, that we will provide for those who cannot provide for themselves because we want to, and not because we have to. We will still make appropriate provisions for the disabled, the uneducated, and the downtrodden, etc., because that is the type of people we are.

But in essence, we must get back to the fundamental concept that we are the ones that are responsible for our country, not the government. Governments at all levels are simply bureaucracies that will almost always attempt to get larger and more controlling. And in so doing they will increasingly become more expensive and inflexible. Furthermore, it is not an exaggeration to say that governments are driven by two rules. The first is that government is never wrong. The second is that if there is by chance an exception to the first rule, government was at least trying to do the right thing, so it is still right.

But we as adults do not need such overbearing and extremely protective parents. Let government provide for such things as police and a military to keep us safe, and a policy and means to deal and negotiate with other countries. Let it also set up a system of justice for all, and of a stable currency.

And let it also be a last resort to provide food, clothing, shelter, and medical care for those who are unable to provide for themselves.

But otherwise have government get out of the way for those who will provide goods, services and employment for the betterment of us all, just as it has in the past. Remember in this regard that countries are only as strong as their economies. Yes, the civilized world does in fact need government, but government does not create wealth. It only takes it and spends it. As such, it is a drain upon us all.

Similarly, we as adults do not need, or want, government to be in our bedrooms or otherwise to be interfering unnecessarily with our private lives. Our Founding Fathers took elaborate steps to create our Bill of Rights to protect us from intrusive government. But government has been hard at work ever since that time in trying to take our rights away from us. And the more it is successful in that effort, the more our country loses what has made it great. Why? Because the soul of our country is its freedoms. And those freedoms have historically made us the envy of most of the rest of the world.

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Actually, when you stop to think about it, what we have discussed here are the classic conservative values of free enterprise, and the classic liberal values of rugged individualism and freedom from the intrusion of government. In other words, what we have described is a Libertarian.

So I propose these ideas to you as food for thought as we enter the New Year. Our country has in many regards lost its way by straying from the values, ideals and responsibilities that have made it great. But, once again, it is our government, and if it isn't working well it is no one's fault but our own. In other words, we should adapt our thinking and actions in all regards to the slogan: "If it's to be, it's up to me."

And with that, I sincerely wish each of you a Happy New Year, along with the hope and expectation, with your personal involvement, of much more success in 2009 than we saw in 2008.

JAMES P. GRAY is a judge of the Orange County Superior Court, the author of *Wearing the Robe - the Art and Responsibilities of Judging in Today's Courts* (Square One Press, 2008), and can be contacted at JimPGray@sbcglobal.net or at his website at www.JudgeJimGray.com.

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