

The False Choice

One of Obama's favorite persuasion techniques is the use of the "false choice." For example, he suggests that those who oppose ObamaCare want the elderly pushed out to sea on icebergs and sick children left lying in the streets, and that anyone who opposes his cap and trade energy scheme is in favor of pollution and asthmatic children.

At the state and local level, politicians use the same trick. They claim that any budget cut will result in a shortage of teachers, police officers, and firefighters—as though those are the only types of employees paid by tax dollars and there are no useless bureaucrats who could be fired.

The false choice argument is an extremely persuasive technique. The trick is to paint the opponent as an extremist, by suggesting to the listener that there are *only* two options or solutions with regard to the issue at hand—when in fact there may be many options and solutions. Of course, the politician does his best to define his opponent's response for him, typically defining it in the most extreme and distorted way possible.

Obama is a master of the false choice. Whether he was well taught decades ago or is simply an expert at deception—or both—is irrelevant. But once the audience learns to recognize the technique, it suddenly becomes ineffective and exposes the foolishness of the argument:

"Discussions with dictators with no preconditions" or "cowboy diplomacy."

"ObamaCare" or "children denied health care."

"Moratorium on deepwater oil drilling" or "more catastrophic oil spills."

"\$787 billion stimulus bill" or "a great depression."

"TARP funds to bail out Wall Street" or "an alternative too horrible to contemplate."

"Higher taxes" or "closed libraries and museums."

"Higher taxes" or "laid off teachers, police officers, and firefighters."

"Higher taxes" or "[insert whatever the politician's audience values the most]"

You could spend days compiling a list of the many false choices argued by politicians. They always use the "either/or" scenario. They never recognize that there may be other solutions or a middle ground.

As an example, assume your local municipality has a water treatment facility that provides area residents with fresh drinking water. The facility filters the water and removes harmful chemicals. Of course, it is impossible to remove *all* chemicals and make the water totally pure—there is always *something* in it in addition to hydrogen and oxygen. The engineers and scientists work to reduce levels of unwanted chemical and minerals so that they are below acceptable “parts per million” (ppm) standards.

Now, assume chemical X is in the community’s drinking water at a level of 50 ppm, and further, that the acceptable standard is to maintain that level below 500 ppm. In other words, with the chemical at a level of 50 ppm the water is safe to drink. The facility *could* conceivably reduce the level from 50 ppm to 10 ppm, but to do so would be extraordinarily expensive. The cost would exceed the benefit, so it is not done.

But now it is election season, and mayoral candidate A announces, “I have learned that chemical X is in the water supply, at levels as great as 50 parts per million! If I elected, I promise to address that issue!”

Candidate B, when asked by a reporter about the “problem,” responds, “Our facility is operating normally. There is no problem. It is not an issue.”

Candidate A, of course, predictably tells audiences, “My opponent seems not to care about the safety of your drinking water! Do you know that the rate of autism in this great nation has been increasing at an alarming rate? My opponent seems to be satisfied with the status quo! That’s because *he* can afford expensive bottled water!”

Candidate A is relying on the ignorance of the voters in order to get elected. He knows full well that 50 ppm is an acceptable standard. But if he is smart he will not even allow the debate to address how much of chemical X is acceptable. He presents the choice as *none versus some*. In doing so, he presents his opponent as being in favor of poisonous chemicals in the water supply. Candidate B of course does not *favor* poisonous water, but he knows that the water supplies of virtually every American city have to allow limited levels of unwanted chemicals and minerals because to eliminate them all is impossible.

Candidate B needs to present the evidence in order to convince the voters that there is nothing wrong with the drinking water and no need to become hysterical. Candidate A needs only to frighten the voters. Each candidate has 30 seconds to do so in a television commercial. Which candidate has the easier task?

The false choice is an attempt to make the listener neglect to consider *other* options. The question, “Do you want A or B?” forces the listener to make the choice—and forget that there may also be options C, D, and E. The typical politician would *never* ask the question: “Is it sufficient to allow up to 50 ppm of chemical X in the water supply, or should we charge more for water in order to reduce the level to less than 50 ppm?” (Newt

Gingrich and Ron Paul might, but they are exceptions—who so far have not won the presidency.) It is far easier to ask, “Are you opposed to or in favor of poison in our water supply?” In other words, “Me good, opponent bad.”

Obama and most politicians use the false choice technique, because they will virtually *never* encounter the proper response: “I don’t accept the premise of your question.” A *good* journalist will question the premise and expose the politician as manipulative and phony—but finding that good journalist is another story altogether. Obama got elected because the journalists—and I use the term loosely—readily (if not eagerly) accepted whatever he had to say.

In early 2009 Obama’s false choice was essentially, “The government must take over General Motors or the company will go bankrupt and thousands will lose their jobs!” If a Republican opposed Obama’s scheme, he was portrayed as an evil, “dog-eat-dog” capitalist who did not care about unemployed auto workers. (Obama of course did not say, “Please support my scheme for screwing the people who own GM stocks and bonds so that I can turn those assets over to the union.”) Obama presented a false choice: a government bail-out or the end of the U.S. auto industry. The other option was to simply allow GM to file bankruptcy, reorganize, abrogate and renegotiate its absurdly destructive union contracts—and continue operating on a stronger, albeit reduced, footing. Instead, U.S. taxpayers are now on the hook for tens of billions of dollars, the union now owns what stockholders and bondholders should own, Obama has circumvented the U.S. Constitution—and people are buying Fords, Hondas, and Hyundais anyway.

The false choice argument is virtually always used with the issue of illegal immigration. When someone says, “We can’t very well deport 20 million people!” he or she is applying the false choice technique. The statement’s implicit “choice” is *deport each and every illegal immigrant* or *grant them all amnesty and make them U.S. citizens*. The trick is to convince the listener that deporting 20 million people is such an absurd idea that of course we must grant them amnesty—*there is no other choice!*

But of course there is another choice. Most illegal immigrants from Mexico do not want to become U.S. citizens—they just want to be free from deportation so they can take advantage of the benefits of living in the United States. U.S. businesses do not care if they become citizens either—they simply want cheap labor. Democrats, however, desperately want the illegals to be made citizens—because they represent millions of additional votes to keep them in power.

The usual argument of “deport them versus make them citizens” fails to recognize a third option: neither deport the illegal immigrants nor make them voting citizens. Instead, just make it more difficult for them to receive federal and state hand-outs. Many illegals will voluntarily choose to return home to Mexico and will not need to be deported. And for those who remain and who must find jobs because they are not being given handouts, it should make little difference that at age 80 they are still not citizens. The argument that

amnesty for illegals is critical suggests that something dramatic and unacceptable would somehow occur if a Mexican grows old in the United States without becoming a citizen. The proponents of amnesty need to explain what that might be beyond “getting them out of the shadows.” Many Americans likely do not care if 20 million illegals grow old and die “in the shadows”—shadows which they sought in the first place. (Some might also argue, “If Obama can go through life illegally using the Social Security of a dead man from Connecticut, why can’t 20 million Mexicans?”)

The issue for most Americans is not so much that many immigrants entered the United States illegally; it is that they are *parasites* living off American *producers*. (And some are violent criminals. Illegal immigrants who engage in violent criminal conduct should of course be arrested and deported. It is also obviously critical to build a complete border fence and hire thousands more Border Patrol agents to keep more millions of illegals from entering the country.) But eliminating the free benefits the taxpayers are forced to provide for illegal immigrants would solve the illegal immigration problem more readily than mass deportation or instant citizenship. After all, converting an illegal immigrant who collects welfare into a legal immigrant who collects welfare serves no purpose—beyond that of the Democrat who will get his vote.

False choices must be confronted. The proper response to the question, “Should we deport all illegal immigrants or grant them amnesty?” is “I do not accept your false choice.” The good news is that the politician can play his parlor tricks only so long. Eventually the audience sees the card hidden in his sleeve. And the false choices become increasingly obvious. “We must place a moratorium on deepwater drilling or destroy the environment” is a false choice that most will not accept. Even Gulf Coast residents who live in that environment do not see the situation as “oil bad, solar and wind good.” One can be in favor of drilling for oil and also be in favor of a clean environment. It is not one or the other. Instead of Obama presenting Americans with the false choice of “drilling or no drilling,” Americans should present *him* with the true choice of “safer drilling for oil in Alaska and in shallow offshore waters or continued riskier drilling in deep waters?”—and judge him based on how he answers *that* question.

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