

## ***My Friend, Mary***

My friend, Mary, is really a terrific person. She is quite bright, and I have worked with her for many years.

Mary never had any interest in politics, and she made her best efforts to know as little as possible. However, the world has changed for Mary and now she has become interested in politics. She wants to learn, study, and attend meetings of different political groups to find out what all the noise and fighting is about. Heaven bless Mary for her efforts, but I hope she does not become cynical and a political dropout altogether.

Mary is looking for people to talk to about politics, and she has landed on me as someone who is willing to listen and give her suitably skeptical, mainly middle-of-the-road, feedback. After all, in this day and age, how many “boring moderates” are there?

In talking to Mary, I have learned a lot about what is driving people politically these days, and that is as follows:

1. Forced to extremes. People seem to be forced to extremes. Either you are for or against something. If you are against abortion and gay marriage, you have to be against masks and vaccines. Why? If the issue is about control over one’s self and body, does it not make sense that somebody who is against abortion is meddling with a women’s right to choose, at least in the first trimester? Many people in the Republican Party believe that there are vast conspiracies going on in the world, designed to put us all under the leadership of a Democratic-style Chairman Mao. Some Democrats in the left wing of the party believe that a white supremacist takeover is imminent. Libertarians have few followers in actuality, although many people may agree with them. As to the Independent movement, they simply do not have the money, power or connections to have a significant impact.

2. Party identification. While many people identify as Republicans or Democrats, the true number of people at the extremes of both parties are very small. Nevertheless, it is those extremists who donate money and drive the agenda of the party. Most Democrats are not big supporters of Bernie Sanders, and most Republicans are plenty nervous about Donald Trump. Nevertheless, the quiet, thoughtful majority either do not vote because of the general sense of disgust, and certainly do not put the money in the party that is necessary to support more thoughtful candidates. The Libertarians are not a force at all, and the days of John Anderson Independents seems long past. The parties, Democratic and Republican, no matter how fractious they may appear internally, have done a good job of keeping their followers in line. Unlike other countries that splinter into many parties, our electoral system, geographic as it is, has a winner-take-all system that discourages small parties. Countries that do have a multiplicity of parties complain that they would like to have an American system so that they do not have to deal with all of those annoying disruptive opinions.

3. Consistency. It is difficult for Mary and many others to figure out what a consistent approach is to individual rights and liberties. In 1905, the United States Supreme Court sustained the conviction of a man from Massachusetts who refused

smallpox injections. Those who are touting injections and masking today rely upon that 1905 opinion. However, the world has changed a lot since then, and thanks to *Cantwell v. Connecticut*, striking down a Connecticut law interfering with the sale of birth control, we now view individual rights and liberties on a much more personal basis. Thanks to the opinions of “liberals” William Brennan and Arthur Goldberg, new life has been breathed into the Ninth Amendment. In other words, the enumerated individual rights and liberties found in the first 10 Amendments to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, may not be inclusive. The Ninth Amendment, never providing any substantive rights itself, may suggest that other rights not written into the Constitution exist in the “penumbra” of the Bill of Rights. Whatever the past case law of the United States Supreme Court, we will see decisions as to whether there is a “right” to refuse a vaccine or a mask. Many cases currently in litigation rise and fall on whether the government had legal authority to impose restrictions or vaccine requirements and whether employers can follow suit. With the passage of time, the courts will address the more fundamental issue as to whether there is an individual prerogative to refuse healthcare measures, notwithstanding that the individual choice may harm others. Those cases are now winding their way through the system and there will be many more. Mary is watching that closely!

4. Invoking Religion. Groups that are for or against various propositions are fond of quoting their religious pedigree. Some organizations ask people to subscribe to the fact that “we are all Christians”. Islamic groups may demand fidelity to Sharia Law. Jewish groups frequently, and sometimes mistakenly, have invented the concept of Tikkun Olam, Healing of the World. The distortion of these and other religious views to propel a political agenda has been dangerous since the dawn of mankind. There is nothing more toxic than the mixture of religion and politics. While many of the Founders of this country were themselves religious people, they had a healthy disrespect for organized religious precepts that impinged upon civil governance. Therefore, it was not inconsistent to many colonists to have their own version of the First Amendment freedom of religion, and yet at the same time prohibit Jews and others who are non-Christian from holding office.

5. Worse now or in the past? I am fond of pointing out to my friend Mary that, if you go back to the early 1900s, there were no laws protecting child labor; unionization was not legal on the federal level; the environmental reforms of Teddy Roosevelt had been forgotten quickly; and world war was the order of the day. Women, in those times, had little or no rights and it took a Constitutional Amendment to repair that wrong. Segregation existed throughout the United States, even in the north. My parents told me that while driving to Lake George for their honeymoon, they saw signs in front of inns and restaurants that said “No Jews or Dogs” or “No Jews or Niggers”. Yes, that was in America, New York State, as recently as the early 1940s.

Were things worse then or now? There are those who believe that nothing could be worse than the present. It is a continual mistake of civilization to forget the past. While the past may not always be prologue, it certainly is instructive. Our country provides more opportunity and is more fair to its citizens than it has ever been in its history. However, that does not mean that the conjunction of big government, big corporations, powerful political parties and non-governmental organizations is not dangerous and scary. We should be invoking the antitrust laws to address the social media

stranglehold over the American people, and we need to assure that government does not get too cozy with the biggest and richest players in society. This does not mean that we embrace Karl Marx, who established his own fascist style control mechanism; but it does mean that we all need to be as engaged as Mary wants to be.

Many congratulations to you, and stick with it. Please let us continue schmoozing, talking, and having fun arguing about politics, society, the future, and all that is just and good!

*Clifford A. Rieders, Esquire  
Rieders, Travis, Humphrey,  
Waters & Dohrmann  
161 West Third Street  
Williamsport, PA 17701  
(570) 323-8711 (telephone)  
(570) 323-4192 (facsimile)*

*Cliff Rieders is a Board-Certified Trial Advocate in Williamsport, is Past President of the Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers Association and a past member of the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority. None of the opinions expressed necessarily represent the views of these organizations.*