
HON. KARL ZINSMEISTER: DOMESTIC POLICY ADVISOR TO THE PRESIDENT

A SOCIETY WITHOUT DICTATORS

INTRODUCTION: My name is Allyson Ho, and it is my privilege to introduce Karl Zinsmeister, who serves as the President's domestic policy adviser. It's a privilege because it gives me the opportunity to express my gratitude for his deeply principled leadership and service to our country.

Before he was named by the President to serve as his domestic policy adviser, Mr. Zinsmeister had been a reporter embedded with our troops in combat zones in Iraq. Out of that experience, he has written two books chronicling his time with our troops in harms way, and his evident admiration for and respect for their sacrifice and service is nothing short of inspiring.

Mr. Zinsmeister served for a dozen years as editor-in-chief of the *American Enterprise*, and national magazine of politics, business, and culture. He was also the U. B. Fuqua Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute here in Washington, DC. His studies and writings have covered topics ranging from economics to social welfare and demographics to cultural trends. He is a graduate of Yale University—don't hold that against him—and spent time engaged in further studies at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland.

I am so pleased to have the privilege to introduce the President's domestic policy adviser, Karl Zinsmeister.

HON. MR. ZINSMEISTER: I can't tell you what a treat it is to have Allyson introduce me. She was one of the first people I worked with when I joined the White House as a completely wet-behind-the-ears rookie, and helped get me started. It's great to see her.

I first started speaking at Federalist Society events in the mid-'80s, not long after the Society was founded. In those days it was more a conspiracy of ideas, as opposed to a full-blown organization with dues-paying members and a logo and a secret handshake. (I assume you have a secret handshake.)

Back then—and 20 years is not so long ago—federal domestic spending was only about half what it is today, in inflation-adjusted terms. You have to ask yourself: how did we let that happen, a doubling of government's bulk in a comparatively short period

of time? The answer is that this is what government does, organically, if you don't make sure something different happens. The vine just grows and grows and grows, unless the gardener keeps it manageable.

John Adams warned, "Government turns every contingency into an excuse for enhancing power in itself." For generations, Americans have relied on various barriers to hold the kudzu in check. Most particularly, we've depended on James Madison's parchment barriers. But there have also been economic and cultural and even physical barriers that moderated the scope of government. My friend Chris DeMuth has argued that Jefferson did us the favor of adding a climatological barrier when he seated the Federal government in Washington, whose summer environment kept would-be empire builders away from their workbenches for several months of the year—until Willis Carrier undid that safeguard by air-conditioning buildings.

Today, we can't rely on heat and humidity, or the modesty of a young nation's resources, or, alas, even on Madison's parchment barriers to keep self-aggrandizing government in check. Instead, we have to be wise and good. To keep appropriate limits on the state, we're going to have to rely on solid principles, stoutly defended.

Washington is not really my natural habitat, but about six months ago I was pleased to answer a call to serve as this Administration's domestic policy adviser, because there would be chances to contribute to the taming of Leviathan. Before I started work in the West Wing I gave some thought to the broad principles I'd need to keep in sight during my service in behalf of modest government. And I thought that this morning, rather than talk about specific domestic policies, I would review some of those large principles I consider central to governing well.

A good starting place, I think, is the principle of *equality*. Equality not only in the political sense, but just as importantly in the moral sense. In America, every man, woman, and child is presumed to have not only equal rights, but also equal dignity. There's an old aphorism I try to live by which counsels: "Never be haughty to the humble, or humble to the haughty." Both halves of that are important.

“Never be haughty to the humble”: That’s a concept, deeply rooted in Christianity, which lies at the very heart of Western democracy.

And then there’s the other part: “Never be humble to the haughty.” That piece is a more peculiarly American formulation. It comes from our Yankee forebears: Don’t tread on me. It comes from our frontier, where residents adamantly insisted that every man is as good as the next, that every woman is as worthy as another.

This was taken very literally in many places. It didn’t matter if you were rich, or blueblooded, or the boss of the works: if you tried to lord it over a Nantucket sailor, or Kansas sodbuster, or Arizona ranch hand, there was a calculable chance you’d end up with a bop on the nose, or worse. In his book *Washington’s Crossing*, David Hackett Fischer captures this feisty egalitarianism in George Washington’s New England regiments.

The historical roots of this include the fact that many of our immigrants arrived on these shores in open rebellion against aristocratic pretensions. Another root was the fact that most Americans owned their own land or trade. And then there was the reality that most households were armed. You don’t bully people with firearms strapped to their hips, or hung over their mantels.

There has been an understanding in American society that you need to *uphold* your equality through responsible actions. But if you act respectably in this country, you are owed respect in return—no matter whether your father made his living “fumbling in a greasy till,” as Yeats sneered, or perhaps as a writer of greasy sonnets.

This isn’t just some democratic courtesy. It’s the best way to productively involve all citizens in our self-governing society. The last senator I sat down with was the son of a Greyhound bus driver. The fact that there is no wall separating drivers from senators is a wonderful thing for this country, not just morally but practically. It makes us both a freer and a stronger society than Yeats’s brittle European oligarchy.

Where should this tradition of equality lead an American political thinker? I suggest it ought to propel us to a powerful *respect for everyday choices*.

I believe it’s important we resist the impulse to “improve” the lives of ordinary people without their consent. For American history suggests that everyday citizens, not “experts,” are generally the best arbiters of law and policy.

Remember how William F. Buckley once declared that he would rather be ruled by the first 2,000 names in the Boston phone book than by the Harvard faculty? That’s not just rabbleroxing, or obscurantism. Our Founding Fathers made the very same choice. Though it was a radical idea at the time, they concluded that the large body of ordinary Americans—intently focused on their private affairs and the facts on the ground in their home communities—would be less likely to drift into misunderstandings of human nature, social reality, and economic truth than persons who manipulate theory for a living. (Like idiot domestic policy advisers.)

We are dramatically different from other nations in this. Even today in advanced countries like Japan and most European nations, society is much more traditionally commanded from above. A small elect anointed at places like the Sorbonne, Tokyo University, and in tight networks of gatekeeping institutions and clans, exerts disproportionate control. In France, nearly all forms of social power are tightly centralized in Paris. In Britain, likewise, if you want to be at the heart of things, you have to be in London. There is one locale which dominates as the finance center, educational center, seat of government, and creative hub. That is not true in the United States, however. Here, power and talent and financial resources and cultural authority are much more democratically scattered across the country, from Boston to Nashville to Charlotte to Atlanta to Houston to Silicon Valley to Seattle.

The egalitarian instinct of our Founders has proved practical and wise. At 230 years of age, the U.S. government is now the oldest and stablest on the planet. We’ve dodged the traumas of revolution, genocide, and expansionist war that many nations steered by enlightened elites have stumbled into. Our highly decentralized, bottom-up economy has outperformed all counterparts managed from above by mandarins. And our citizenry has turned into (statistically speaking) the most educated, inventive, hard-working, faithful, and charitable population on the planet.

This is not a question of good ordinary citizens vs. wicked intellectuals. Everyday Americans are not saints or savants with magical decision-making powers. But there are structural reasons why individual households will often make better decisions than experts. For one thing, they usually have richer

information. Trying to separate good schools from mediocre ones, or excellent doctors from poor ones, for example, is very hard when attempted from a government bureau or academic office. We try! But we usually fail. Yet individual Americans make those kinds of judgments routinely. Rule by the millions works because the millions are close to daily realities. And when they do make errors in judgment, their errors usually cancel each other out.

The general superiority of decentralized problem-solving reflects some iron rules of nature. Consider a simple example: Even a half-inebriated crowd can empty itself out of any football stadium in a matter of minutes. Yet commanding that process from some master perch is, as those of you with some background in mathematics or statistics will know, an almost insoluble problem. You could cover the field from goalpost to goalpost with hardware and programmers, and you'd end up frustrated. There are just too many variables: 80,000 people; 55 exits; scores of stairways; pillars that block certain routes; backups in specific aisles; it's just too much to orchestrate. Yet leave each slob to himself and he'll be opening the door to his Chevy before the scoreboard lights are cool. He may not realize that he's "exhibiting large-scale adaptive intelligence in the absence of central direction," as scientists put it. But he is.

I read a book some time ago called *Ants at Work*, written by a Stanford entomologist who intensively studied a large colony of harvester ants for 17 years. (And you thought your professional expertise was narrow.) Her goal was to discover how these tens of thousands of tiny creatures coordinate the specialized tasks essential to colony health—food harvest and storage, garbage toting, child care, tunnel making, war fighting, etc. Who's directing the show to make sure the right work gets done?

The answer, she discovers, is that *nobody* is in charge. Each colony "operates without any central or hierarchical control.... No insect issues commands to another." These complex societies are built instead, she reports, on thousands of simple decisions made by individual creatures, with those many micro-decisions melding together to yield an efficient macro-result. Humans being more sophisticated than ants, there is reason to think we have even less need for hierarchy, caste, and central direction.

And, contrary to George Orwell, as human society becomes more technological, we are

relying more rather than less on decentralization of authority. Not many years ago, supercomputers were extraordinarily complex and centralized devices, where all roads and all wires led to one extremely expensive custom-made processing chip. Today, there is no emperor-king processor in a supercomputer. The latest versions are made with more than 16,000 plebeian, everyday chips just like the one in your Dell, all working in democratic parallel. And this so-called "distributed intelligence" has turned out to be vastly more powerful than the elegant genius of the old Cray supercomputers that worked from the top down.

Or take the Linux computer operating system—the computer code which has become the backbone of the digital world. As many of you probably know, there is no master control over what goes into Linux. Thousands of informal contributors just add and subtract and tinker with Linux, and then put their result out there in the marketplace. And in a fascinating and distinctly non-chaotic process, Linux quickly turned into the most flexible and powerful and error-free computer language available.

This pattern of complex problems being solved by small actors working locally without heavy central direction is not just the story of the Internet, it is a phenomenon common all across nature. And it is something Americans in particular incline toward. During the Battle of King's Mountain in the Revolutionary War, American Colonel Isaac Shelby instructed his men, "When we encounter the enemy, don't wait for the word of command. Let each one of you be your own officer." His scattered backwoods marksmen went on to defeat a larger force of regimented soldiers by relying on that self-directed process of decision making.

So: back to the West Wing. How should this American inheritance affect those of us who are advising the President? Well, my view is that it ought to incline us strongly toward *decentralism*. We must always try to resolve issues at the lowest possible level of governance. We need to be powerfully protective of individual sovereignty, local control, and self-determination. Not out of ideology, but out of simple practicality and surrender to the facts of nature.

Local citizens not only tend to have better information than remote authorities on the best ways to solve a problem, they are also likelier to tolerate variety, and to tailor actions to local peculiarities. That's critical, because what works in Utah is

sometimes different from what works in New York. The realities of human society suggest strongly that policy makers should avoid one-size-fits-all policies, and instead encourage experimentation wherever possible.

A corollary to recognizing the power of decentralization is *respecting evolved civil society*.

The reason any wise member of government should avoid stepping on churches, and fraternal organizations, and non-profit groups, and small businesses is not because they have voters in their ranks who might rise up and punish us. Rather, government should approach these kinds of groups with humility because there is priceless information on societal success encoded in their operations. These groups have sprung up, and survived, because they have captured valuable, tested, time-proven truths. If we squash a highly evolved institution like traditional marriage, we throw away the lessons of literally millions of trials and errors on what works in affairs of the heart. When we disrespect the ancient verdicts of religion, we discard a motherlode of hard-won wisdom. Government, if it is to avoid becoming oppressive and unlimited, must leave lots of room for the essential institutions of civil life to do their vital work.

That leads me to my next critical principle of humane governance, which is *thrift*. Thrift is another kind of humility—the humility which recognizes sensible limits, and avoids over-extension and over-indulgence.

The U.S. has traditionally been a very thrifty nation. And that has had a lot to do with our being a lightly ruled nation. At the very same time that heads of state in France, England, Japan and other nations were living and decreeing amidst royal splendor, George Washington was presiding over our nation's government from a small Philadelphia house he had furnished with his own money. He had three cabinet advisors, and two people on his personal staff. When they went on vacation, he wrote his own letters. The entire Federal apparatus totaled 350 civil employees in all its branches.

At one point, Washington and a couple of assistants decided to tour the South. The President slept in inns along the way, with the innkeepers having no idea he was coming. The tour lasted three months, and for almost two-thirds of that time the government could not keep track of where the President was. Not exactly an imperial state.

This was no fluke of our early history. As late as the end of Teddy Roosevelt's term in office, the federal government was only a tenth its present size in employees, and one-fifteenth its current scope in spending per capita. Today, our national government remains about a third smaller (as a portion of the economy) than counterparts in most other industrial nations. But there is a constant tendency for the government to bloat, and this must be resisted if the liberty of Americans to choose their own lives and to spend their own resources are to be preserved over the long run.

Liberty is the key word here. I believe every member of government should be reminded each morning, ideally via talking alarm clock, that in our country, government is just a sideline, not the heart of society. America's most important accomplishments are private and personal and communal. The government is there, in essence, to pave the road and keep the peace so you can take your daughter to a Chopin concerto.

The enlightened and humane thing for a political leader to do, therefore, is to avoid unduly sucking power and resources into government in ways that will constrict the other opportunities open to citizens. I always try to ask myself when evaluating a policy: Will this help individuals and families and localities create richer lives for themselves? I repeat: "...for themselves"—not via someone else proclaiming an accomplishment in their name.

"The mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately," admonished Thomas Jefferson. That expresses the central vision of American politics: that *government should serve, not rule*.

We believe people are generally not to be commanded by others, but should make their own decisions and order their own lives. As obvious as that sounds, it is not a principle many governments have respected over the centuries. Even in the most advanced cultures, history shows that there is a powerful taste for booting and whipping the masses, and accumulating power in a central state.

The American ideal is very different. "Government," warns one aphorism from our founding era, "is force. Like fire, it is a dangerous servant and a fearful master."

As much as possible, I suggest, the Federal government ought to hand off ruling assignments

and authority, and pass down resources and responsibilities to individuals and smaller institutions. A wise government will bolster private entities, and prefer the local to the large. Leaders at all levels ought to concentrate on offering Americans *choices* rather than edicts.

And if we will just do these modest things, our citizens will enjoy the natural efficiency, and freedom, and richness of a society without dictators.

