UNCOMMON COMMON SENSE

By Bill Frayer

Can We Get Back to Civil, Thoughtful Dialogue?

As I watch the travails of the US President, Barack Obama, I notice that, predictably, he is being attacked by conservatives. What may be more surprising is that he is facing withering criticism from the left as well. Many liberals think he has not put up enough of a fight for left-wing ideals. He seems to have few friends at the moment, and his reelection prospects are looking dimmer in light of the poor economy.

I am not interesting in defending Obama's presidency. But I cannot help but notice that the level of rhetoric, from both sides, is extreme and does not lead to thoughtful dialogue. In fact, it may be Obama's efforts to engage in a civil dialogue which gets him into trouble. Let me explain.

In critical thinking courses, we value a particular cognitive disposition called “fair-mindedness.” Although most people probably consider themselves fair-minded, most of us are not. Being fair-minded means that you honestly and thoroughly try to understand all points of view before you make up your mind. This means, of course, studying and understanding your opponent’s most effective arguments before you decide what the most reasonable position is.

The dialogue in Washington, and in the media, is decidedly not fair-minded. How many politicians-- the people paid to make thoughtful, well-reasoned decisions--actually spend time thoughtfully considering their opponents’ positions? In fact, most politicians use developed talking points to spin the issues in their favor and do not really care about being fair-minded. After all, being fair-minded may put them in a weaker position. In a world where winning is everything, thoughtful logic and the creation of new ideas to solve our serious problems is not a priority.

Of course, being fair-minded, understanding that both sides often have good arguments, may lead to using components of your opponents’ ideas in the final solution. This is called compromise and considered an anathema to “true blue” partisans.

So where does such rigidity leave us? Precisely nowhere. If both sides spend their time and energy simply standing pat and repeating the same talking points, then nothing gets done. The system fails, as it has in Washington.

This brings us back to Obama. Like him or not, he has tried, in a very hostile environment, to practice fair-mindedness. He is trying to reach a solution on the budget deal that includes components of Democratic and Republican ideals. He has asked for a “balanced” approach which involves what the Republicans want (significant budget cuts) together with what the Democrats want (revenue increases). He’s stuck in the middle and seen as weak by both sides. Yet, perhaps compromise is precisely what needs to happen. Compromise is how things always move forward politically. It is based on the concept that both sides in a struggle may have valid concerns. But to get to a solution, both sides have to work hard to understand the concerns of the other side.

Perhaps the US political system can no longer engage in clear thinking and practice fair-mindedness. Perhaps the system will continue to be fiercely partisan and unable to reach

compromise. Perhaps the system will break down and calamity will ensue.

Perhaps Barack Obama was elected to address this. Perhaps he is trying to get beyond the shouting and bring fair-minded dialogue to the national debate. Perhaps he's right.