

A Note on 'Mainstream'

and the power of definition

by James Como

Recently Senator Schumer made a threat: unless President Trump's Supreme Court nominee was in the Mainstream, the Democrats would oppose him; this when the President-Elect was urged to name someone in the tradition of Antonin Scalia, who, apparently, was not within that magic flow.

Notice the four assumptions contained in the threat: that 1/ there is a mainstream, 2/ all reasonable people recognize it as such, 3/ it is more nourishing to the commonweal than any other stream, and 4/ Schumer will define it for those who do not know it. I suggest the time is ripe for rejecting the last three, as well as the first as normally understood.

The same assumptions, with the same recommendation, apply to the mass media of communication. There are the putative mainstream media, with the *Times* leading the current, and the . . . the what? Fox News? Breitbart? The Daily Kos? Rush? Politico? *Rolling Stone*? But the *Times* is no more mainstream than the others I've named, its authority stemming from its *consideration* as the paper of record and its editorials as dispositive. (*The Wall Street Journal* has more weekday readers.) It's rather like Daniel Boorstin's definition of a celebrity as someone who is famous for being well-known.

In that light, our political struggle over the past five-plus decades (certainly since Goldwater's presidential candidacy) has been, in part, over definitions, an ongoing attempt to establish a New Normal, 'mainstream', debt, GDP growth, or anything else: that has certainly been Obama's intent. Thus the *image* of our political spectrum has shifted Left, but the on-the-ground reality very much less so and only

selectively. Thus the surprise of so many pundits, Progressives, and professors: *they bought into the new image of normalcy.*

And why not? It is *their image – creation by definition* (which Aristotle teaches is the first of the inventional *topoi*. (Invention here meaning the discovery of arguments, and *topoi* being those lines of thought that help us to think matters through and then to communicate the results.)

Just so does an unborn child become merely a fetus (as with any species), then “a mass of cells” (even though no one has ever asked a pregnant woman how her fetus or cells are doing), as does same-sex union become ‘marriage’, and as does the previously unknown ‘alt-Right’ (both real and repulsive) enter our lexicon without an ‘alt-Left’ when clearly there is one, in the Green Party, Black Lives Matter and other race hustlers, Paul Krugman, Senator Warren, the flag-burners and -removers, and many of those who play identity politics.

C. S. Lewis has uncle Screwtape counsel his nephew Wormwood that a good start in winning a soul for “Our Father below” is the corruption of language. I believe exactly that has happened with ‘mainstream’ (and other concepts), and too often the supposed counter-cultural media have played the same word-game. Okay, so then call and raise: after all, isn’t the discernment of a new mainstream at the core of President Obama’s recent complaint about Fox News? That it’s *everywhere*? It’s time for the image to catch up with the reality and for the new mainstream to start the defining.

In other words, if you believe that there is a mainstream in the first place, and you have half the population with you, and you have a ready-made lexical tool, then *use it*: say out loud that another Antonin Scalia *would be precisely* ‘mainstream’.

And keep going from there.