

Political Extremism

Are you as tired as I am of this constant political extremism? Democrats feel that George Bush was the cause of all past, present, and future problems even though, in many cases, he acted more like a liberal than a conservative, while Republicans think that Obama is the second coming of Lenin even though he bailed out banks and businesses in a manner liberals would not tolerate in a conservative.

No one, it seems, cares to take the time to sort out the problems and look to their root causes regardless of whether the chips fall on the left or the right, or in a manner distributed by fiat or market. Both sides and their supporters have gone to irrational extremes, at least in oratory, and sometimes in action. No, I'm not going to offer opinions about the U.S. political scene in this column, but I do want to point out how the traditional martial arts has, in the last 50 years, shown us a parallel situation.

In the 1950s, martial arts were new to the West, so there was an implicit conflict between Western boxing/wrestling vs. Asian martial arts, notably judo (which people believed was ju-jitsu).

In the 1960s, the battle was between the then popular sport judo and the fledgling karate. I remember arguments in the form of vignettes that claimed victory by describing how a judo person swept a karate person (as if that would end the fight) or the karate person punched the judo person as he went for his grips. No one noticed that judo was taught 80% as a sport and, at the time, karate was taught 80% as self-defense. The scenarios offered were one-sided, much as political arguments are today: my side is always right, better, produces a more desirable result, or is more morally pure.

In the 1970s, Bruce Lee, in trying to cut through the fog of martial arts fantasy, set up a battleground between "classical" arts and modern street arts. Unfortunately, despite some valid arguments, the dichotomy was not always a valid one. Some street arts, as tough as they were, did not produce disciplined practitioners of good character; and, some traditional arts (they weren't really "classical") produced disciplined people who could not defend themselves, except in the very fantasy situations Lee produced on the screen. More important than what kind of art you studied was the *reason* you studied—and which art helped you reach that goal. But the political extremism ignored goal-orientation in lieu of the assumed goals of either street-toughness or personal development. Somehow an amalgam of the two was seldom considered.

In the 1980s, ninja surreptitiously invaded the martial arts scene with an interesting mix of traditionalistic arts that were not afraid to do things differently. Rather than create a conflict with the more standard judo, kung fu, karate, tae kwon do, and aikido, ninjutsu unintentionally reinforced Lee's point that one needs to diversify to be completely prepared.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, full contact karate gave way to what is now cage fighting. Now traditionalists from every hue and cry get along better than they ever have, probably because a common opponent has swept the popularity (and the market) out from under them: MMA. So now we are down to two parties, the relatively conservative traditional martial artists and the more radical cage-fighters. Each can easily

point out the other's deficiencies; neither seems to see the other's virtues. We act as if there were not enough market for both wings or as if one wing poisons the other. In fact, the advocates of both wings are likely to use poison—poison pens and tongues, at least.

Potential martial artists in free economies vote with their legal tender and hard-earned time. Sure, they don't always know what's best for them, so writers like myself and many others offer our opinions to influence their expenditures of money and minutes. That is as is should be. It is a fair and time-honored process that may not always work to our liking, but eventually gets people what they want, or thought they wanted, and what they deserved.

If you are as tired of political extremism as I am, just try to stay open-minded and vote with your own time and money, while trusting in the process. It will all work out...in a decade or two.

“Back to Basics” continues this theme next week.