If You Liked Health Care, You’ll Love Afghanistan

By Marty Kaplan

If you’re depressed by the way the national debate about health care has been playing out, just wait until the rubber hits the road on Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Israel. If you’re enraged by the way Wall Street’s rescue has made us hostages to their recklessness, get ready for how the oil and coal industries are going to game the energy and climate change decisions ahead. If you’re scared by the way the media can trivialize and polarize and make entertainment out of any topic in its crosshairs, imagine its toxic impact when we get around to dealing with education, immigration and trade.

An authoritarian society has no trouble making decisions. Dictatorships — whether right or left, theological or ideological — don’t deliberate. But open societies have to clear two hurdles if they want to do things democratically.

The first is biological — the way humans are hardwired.

We may prize reason, but our limbic system — the reptile part of our brain, the governor of our emotions, the seat of pleasure and fear and attention and memory — is pre-rational. We can’t help rubbernecking at accidents or being spellbound by stories. Sex, violence and novelty jerk our chain, whether we want them to or not. Our genes run us way more than we’re comfortable acknowledging, whether we’re negotiating between altruism and self-interest, or Our Tribe and the Other, or reality and illusion.

That’s why Plato, in The Republic, banished poets — the pop entertainers of their time — from the ideal state: even those brainy Athenians couldn’t help succumbing to rhythm, music and narrative. And it’s why the Roman law student, Alypius, couldn’t watch a gladiatorial show with calm curiosity: As his teacher St. Augustine wrote, Alypius “drank in madness without knowing it,” became drunk on blood and pleasure, entered the Coliseum as one man but became, whether he wanted to or not, another.

Dictators can censor artists, jail satirists and use spectacle to control crowds. But open societies need to factor in free speech, even when it makes room for Glenn Becks and Rush Limbaughs; even when it produces gangsta misogyny and blasphemous art; even when it turns its airwaves over to missing balloon boys and runaway brides; even when
accusations like Sarah Palin’s “death panels” and Dick Cheney’s “dithering” and the teapartiers’ “fascism” poison the air of democratic debate.

The second hurdle that democracies have to clear is social — the way values are contested and truth is determined.

Heterogeneous societies can’t just count on consensus. Open societies can’t simply crush minorities. No one, not even a president, is immune to “You lie!” So the challenge is to figure out how to be pluralistic without being anarchic; how to tolerate almost anything without believing in almost nothing; how to dispute the truth and respect different points of view without being caught in the postmodern trap that says there is no truth, there is only politics.

The Founders knew how difficult it is not only to do what’s right, but first to decide what’s right. That’s why they divided power among three branches, and between two chambers, and between the federal government and the states. It’s why they protected the press with the First Amendment, so that an independent Fourth Estate could act as a check against official truth. It’s why they kept religion out of government, and government out of religion, so that fundamentalism couldn’t tell legislators what laws to write, and so that the state couldn’t tell people what to believe. And it’s why Jefferson and Franklin were champions of public education and public libraries: ignorance is the enemy of freedom.

But starting in the second half of the twentieth century, the world became so bewildering and complicated that society began to outsource its obligation to be informed — first to scientists, who were trusted to know more about dangerous technology than ordinary citizens; then to experts, who were deputized to run foreign policy and the machinery of war; and then to a political chattering class who relieved us of the burden of moral reasoning and made demagoguery both entertaining and profitable. And while this was happening, the checks and balances of democracy were being swamped by the special interests who give candidates the big money they need to buy the big media they need in order to get elected and stay elected.

Now we’re gearing up to debate how many American troops should be committed for how long to what mission in Afghanistan. Politicians and talking heads who’ve never served in the military, and whose own kids will never die in combat, are telling other Americans why their kids must risk their lives half a world away. Experts and officials who got Iraq wrong are getting big airtime to tell us how to get Afghanistan right. We are about to debate the right number of soldiers to turn jihadists into farmers, poppy fields into barley fields, fraud into democracy and corruption into civil society — and the loudest voices will be ones who shouted “appeasement,” demonized dissent and shoveled billions to contractor-mercenaries.

And throughout all this, the views about Afghanistan held by people who think the Mayans really knew the year the world will end will count just the same in opinion polls as the views of people who think that Sony really knows how to market fantasy as reality.

I’m not worried that Obama is getting bad advice in his Afghanistan briefings; I’m confident that every conceivable option will have an advocate at the table. What troubles me isn’t the debate in the Situation Room — it’s how his decision will play out in the circus that democratic deliberation in America has become.

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you’d like.*