

The Wilderness Rules: A Forgotten Compass for Power and Principle

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In my recent book **Common Sense Medicine: Making America Healthy Again** (before RFK purloined it) I discuss ways to push power down to the people, which is what helps make people and their society healthier. This is an example.

Many Americans today feel a quiet unease—an awareness that something fundamental has gone awry in the way our government wields power. In earlier eras, that unease erupted into protest. The Vietnam-era counterculture saw through the official narratives that justified endless war. Later, the War on Terror raised similar questions: how can we condemn terrorism while employing drone strikes that mirror its logic?

Even domestic policies reflect this moral dissonance. The methods used by ICE in detaining migrants—especially children—echo the very abuses we claim to oppose as terror. These are not rogue actors; they are agents of our own government.

In my book I explore how power—left unchecked—tends toward self-interest rather than public wellbeing. This is not a new insight. Thousands of years ago, Confucius described the Mandate of Heaven, which gave people the moral right to depose unjust rulers. Socrates warned against the seduction of power, urging Glaucon to study, and support, cooperative systems instead. Ibn Khaldun echoed this in the 14th century, analyzing the rise and fall of dynasties through the lens of social cohesion in Islamic countries.

To this lineage, I've proposed adding the Wilderness Rules—a framework inspired by Jesus' temptations after his forty-day fast. He was offered three forms of power:

• Appetite: “Turn these stones to bread.” • Wealth: “All the kingdoms of the world I will give you.” • Glory: “Throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple and let angels lift you up.” Jesus rejected all three. Would our self-proclaimed Christian leaders do the same? The rules are: **I will not use my power to satisfy an appetite, obtain unjust wealth, or power over others.**

This question isn't rhetorical—it's foundational. Trump has run roughshod over his opposition and the opposition is disjointed, not knowing how to create a united front for such a blunderbuss assault. He has renamed the Department of Defense the Department of War, ignoring our century old commitment to outlaw war. Would a new party—a Wilderness Party, where every member swore an oath to uphold the rules—prove effective?

Likely not, but it would be a change, and it would be an idea—and ideas are powerful and have a life of their own. Such a party might not win elections, but it would offer something our political landscape sorely lacks: moral clarity.

History shows that ideas, even “impractical” ones, can reshape the world. After World War I, French Prime Minister Aristide Briand proposed outlawing war itself. U.S. Secretary of State Frank Kellogg embraced the idea, and in 1928, the Kellogg-Briand Pact was signed by 58 nations. Though unenforceable, it laid the groundwork for post-WW II tribunals and along with the UN helped reduce territorial conquest dramatically in

the decades that followed. Indeed, it was a radical plan to outlaw war that remade the world. (Oona Hathaway and Scott Shapiro. *The Internationalists: How a Radical Plan to Outlaw War Remade the World*. 2018) The Wilderness Rules carry a similar moral weight. They may not be enforceable, but they offer a compass—a way to reorient our politics toward restraint, cooperation, and integrity. And a political party based on those principles may be able to pull our moral majority together to respond to both ancient and modern abuses more effectively.

In a time when power is too often pursued for its own sake, that compass may be the most radical idea of all.