

POLITICAL THOUGHT

The Conservative Mind

The American right is a cauldron of debate; the left isn't.

BY PETER BERKOWITZ

The left prides itself on, and frequently boasts of, its superior appreciation of the complexity and depth of moral and political life. But political debate in America today tells a different story.

On a variety of issues that currently divide the nation, those to the left of center seem to be converging, their ranks increasingly untroubled by debate or dissent, except on daily tactics and long-term strategy. Meanwhile, those to the right of center are engaged in an intense intra-party struggle to balance competing principles and goods.

One source of the divisions evident today is the tension in modern conservatism between its commitment to individual liberty, and its lively appreciation of the need to preserve the beliefs, practices, associations and institutions that form citizens capable of preserving liberty. The conservative reflex to resist change must often be overcome, because prudent change is necessary to defend liberty. Yet the tension within often compels conservatives to wrestle with the consequences of change more fully than progressives--for whom change itself is often seen as good, and change that contributes to the equalization of social conditions as a very important good.

To be sure, some standard-order issues remain easy for both sides. Democrats instinctively want to repeal the Bush tax cuts, establish government supervised universal healthcare, and impose greater regulation on trade. Just as instinctively Republicans wish to extend the Bush tax cuts, find market mechanisms to broaden health care coverage and reduce limitations on trade.

But on non-standard issues--involving dramatic changes in national security and foreign affairs, the power of medicine and technology to intervene at the early stages of life, and the social meaning of marriage and family, the partisans show a clear difference: the left is more and more of one mind while divisions on the right deepen.



Consider Iraq. The split among conservatives has widened since Saddam was toppled in the spring of 2003. Traditional realists continue to put their trust in containment, and reject nation-building on the grounds that we lack both a moral obligation and the requisite knowledge of Arabic, Iraqi culture and politics, and Islam. Supporters of the war still argue that, in an age of mega-terror, planting the seeds of liberty and democracy in the Muslim Middle East is a reasonable response to the poverty, illiteracy, authoritarianism, violence and religious fanaticism that plagues the region.

In contrast, Democrats today are nearly united in the belief that the invasion has been a fiasco and that we must withdraw promptly. Indeed, rare is the Democrat (Sen. Joe Lieberman was compelled to run as an Independent) who does not sound like a traditional

realist denying both America's moral obligation to remain in Iraq and its capacity to bring order to the country.

Consider also abortion rights and embryonic stem-cell research. Here too, the right is torn, with the social conservative wing opposed to both, and the small government, libertarian wing supporting both. No such major divisions are in evidence on the left. Rare is the progressive man or woman who opposes abortion rights, or who regards the destruction of embryos as the taking of human life, or even as a dangerous precedent corroding our respect for the most vulnerable among us.

And look at same-sex marriage. Again, the right is rent by serious difference of opinion. A crucial segment of those who voted for Bush in 2000 and 2004 think that the Constitution should be amended to protect the traditional understanding of marriage as a union between one man and one woman. Another crucial segment of the Republican coalition rejects alteration of the Constitution to advance debatable social policy, preferring that states function as laboratories of innovation.

Meanwhile, on the left, despite ambivalence among the rank and file, all that remains to be decided at the elite level is how and in what ways to endorse same-sex marriage. Few doubt that presidential candidate John Kerry's opposition to same-sex marriage in 2004 was driven more by political calculation than moral conviction. And rare is the man or woman of the left who, in public debate, identifies competing principles and goods that ought to cause hesitation or doubt about same-sex marriage's justice or benefits to the nation.

This absence on the left of debate or dissent about moral and political ends has been aided and abetted by many of the party's foremost intellectuals, who have reveled in denouncing George W. Bush as a dictator, in declaring democracy in 21st-century America all but illegitimate, and in diagnosing conservatism in America as in the grips of fascist sentiments and opinions.

A few months ago, Hoover Institution research fellow Dinesh D'Souza published a highly polemical book, "The Enemy at Home," which held the cultural left responsible for causing 9/11 and contended that American conservatives should repudiate fellow citizens on the left and instead form alliances with traditional Muslims around the world. Conservatives of many stripes leapt into the fray to criticize it. But rare is the voice on the left that has criticized Boston College professor and New Republic contributing editor Alan Wolfe, former secretary of labor and Berkeley professor Robert Reich, New Republic editor-at-large and Council on Foreign Relations senior fellow Peter Beinart, Berkeley professor George Lakoff, and New York University law professor Ronald Dworkin--all of whom have publicly argued in the last several years that conservatives form an enemy at home.

One explanation of the unity on the left is its belief that today's divisive political questions have easy answers--but because of their illiberal opinions and aims, conservatives are unable to see this and, in a mere six years, have brought democracy in America to the brink. This explanation, however, contradicts the vital lesson of John Stuart Mill's liberalism that political questions, as opposed to mathematical questions, tend by their very nature to be many-sided. Indeed, it contradicts the left's celebration of its own appreciation of the complexity and depth of politics.

Another explanation is that blinded by rage at the Bush administration and resentment over its own lack of power, the left has betrayed its commitment to grasp the many-sidedness of politics, and, in the process, has lost appreciation of modern conservatism's distinctive

contribution to the defense of a good, liberty, which the left also prizes. Indeed, the widespread ignorance among the highly educated of the conservative tradition in America is appalling.

In contrast to much European conservatism, which harks back to premodern times and the political preeminence of religion and royalty, in America--which lacked a feudal past to preserve or recover--conservatism has always revolved around the preservation of individual liberty. Of course modern conservatism generally admires virtues embodied in religious faith and the aristocratic devotion to excellence. It also tends to emphasize the weaknesses of human nature, the ironies and tragedies of history, and the limitations of reason and politics. At the same time, it wishes to put these virtues and this knowledge in liberty's service.

Balancing the claims of liberty and tradition, or showing how liberty depends on tradition, is the very essence of modern conservatism, the founding text for which was provided by Whig orator and statesman Edmund Burke in his 1790 polemic, "Reflections on the Revolution in France." The divisions within contemporary American conservatism--social conservatives, libertarians, and neoconservatives--arise from differences over which goods most urgently need to be preserved, to what extent, and with what role for government.

The varieties of conservatism are poorly understood today not only because of the bitterness of current political battles but also because the books that have played a key role in forming the several schools go largely untaught at our universities and largely unread by our professors. Indeed, perhaps one cause of the polarization that afflicts our political and intellectual class is the failure of our universities to teach, and in many cases to note the existence of, the conservative dimensions of American political thought.

Rare is the political scientist, to say nothing of other faculty, who can sketch the argument, or articulate the point of view, of such influential works as Russell Kirk's "The Conservative Mind" (1953), F. A. Hayek's "The Road to Serfdom" (1944) or Leo Strauss's "Natural Right and History" (1953). Yet these works, and the schools they helped launch, are essential to understanding not only where we come from but where we should head.

Kirk identified six elements that make the conservative mind: belief in a transcendent order that "rules society as well as conscience"; attachment to "the proliferating variety and mystery of human existence" as against the routinizing and leveling forces of modern society; the assumption that "civilized society requires orders and classes"; the conviction that "freedom and property are closely linked"; faith in custom and convention and consequently a "distrust of the 'sophisters, calculators, and economists' who would reconstruct society upon abstract designs"; and a wariness of innovation coupled with a recognition that "prudent innovation is the means of social preservation." The leading role in this mix that Kirk attaches to religion marks him as a social conservative; his insistence that religion provides the indispensable ground for individual liberty marks him as a modern conservative.



F.A. Hayek

Famously, at least in libertarian circles, Hayek, an Austrian-born economist who became a British citizen and then immigrated to the U.S. in 1950, wrote a postscript to "The Constitution of Liberty" (1960), explaining why he was not a conservative. For him,

"true conservatism"--which he confused with European reaction--was characterized by "opposition to drastic change" and a complacent embrace of established authority. Because his overriding goal was to preserve liberty, Hayek considered himself a liberal, but he recognized that in the face of the challenges presented mid-century by socialism, he would often find himself in alliance with conservatives. As a staunch member of the party of liberty, Hayek was keen to identify the political arrangements that would allow for "free growth" and "spontaneous change," which, he argued, brought economic prosperity and created the conditions for individual development. This meant preserving the tradition of classical liberalism, and defending limited, constitutional government against encroachments by the welfare state and paternalistic legislation.

For Strauss, what was most urgently in need in preservation was an idea, the idea of natural right. Like Kirk, Strauss believed that modern doctrines of natural right derived support from biblical faith. Like Hayek, Strauss taught that limited, constitutional government was indispensable to our freedom. But Strauss also saw that modern doctrines of natural right contained debilitating tendencies, which, increasingly, provided support for stupefying and intolerant dogmas. To arrest the decay, he turned to the classical natural right teachings of Plato and Aristotle, who were neither liberals nor democrats, but whose reflections on knowledge, politics and virtue, Strauss concluded, provided liberal democracy sturdier foundations.

There can not be *a* conservative soul today in the way one can speak of a liberal soul or spirit. Whereas the latter revolves around the paramount good of freedom, modern conservatives, while loving liberty, differ over its position in the hierarchy of goods most in need of preservation, and indeed differ over the paramount good. Yet the writings of Kirk, Hayek and Strauss do form a family. All developed their ideas with a view to the 20th century totalitarian temptations of fascism and communism. All agreed that liberal democracy constituted the last best hope of modern man. And all showed that defending liberty involves a delicate balancing act.

Conservatives, facing uncertainty about George W. Bush's legacy, and the reality of their own errors and excesses, have good reason just now to read and ponder Kirk, Hayek and Strauss. Progressives, too prone these days to perceive difficult moral and political questions as one-sided and too keen to characterize their allies at home in the defense of liberty as enemies, have good reason to do so themselves.

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