

A guide to US liberalism (BEAUCOUP DE VOMISSMENT!!)

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With Bush hatred in full blossom among Democrats, with Republicans still seething with Clinton contempt, with a presidential campaign fast approaching that promises to be a bloody, no-holds-barred brawl, and with the culture wars again flaring up as a result of the decision by the Massachusetts Supreme Court to legalize gay marriage, it is a propitious moment to remind ourselves of the liberalism that Americans share.

That's right. Liberalism. Although it has become a dirty word in American politics, a synonym for the excesses of the welfare state, a rallying cry for bleeding hearts and jerking knees, the principle for which liberalism stands still provides the common ground on which Left and Right in America meet.

A liberal in the broad sense, a sense that covers the preponderance of the political spectrum in America, is one who puts freedom first. Seldom do our political debates call the primacy of freedom into question. To an astonishing degree, they turn on where it is most vulnerable and what policies best secure it.

Progressive liberals certainly put freedom first, while seeing inequality as the chief menace to it. Accordingly, they stand for government that makes a priority of caring for the interests of the poor and disadvantaged through programs funded by a generous redistributive scheme of taxation. They stand for government that advances the interests of women and minorities by promoting abortion rights and affirmative action; for government that protects the environment from the predatory practices of large corporations; and for government that regards as a moral obligation expanding the range and reach of international law and institutions.

Progressive liberals exhibit the pronounced tendency to place concerns about the inequities produced by markets ahead of concerns about the healthy functioning of markets; to place concerns about substantive equality or equality of results ahead of concerns about formal rules or equality of opportunity; and, in the international arena, to place concerns about the human rights of all peoples ahead of concerns about American security interests.

Many of the policies and political predilections for which progressive liberals stand seem to involve a curtailment of freedom. Explicitly or implicitly, however, progressive liberals justify this loss in freedom by the anticipated gain in equality, whose spread, they also hold, is itself an imperative of freedom.

LIBERTARIAN LIBERALS also put individual freedom first. But for them it is not inequality but government that is the chief menace to freedom. Libertarians tend to be skeptical of government regulation on principle and down the line.

Most libertarians of course recognize an indispensable role for government - enforcing contracts, securing basic rights, providing for the common defense. But they also are convinced that with few exceptions government discharges inefficiently, and even counterproductively, many responsibilities of social and economic life that it assumed in the twentieth century. These could be more adequately dealt with, libertarians characteristically contend, if left to markets and private initiative.

Some libertarians embrace traditional moral values, some do not, but as libertarians they oppose government efforts to promote or regulate them. Some libertarians are hawkish, some dovish, both all will be skeptical of international political institutions for the same reason that they are skeptical of domestic ones. And while they may think of themselves as the authentic heirs of 19th century or classical liberalism, most libertarians today tend to be considered by others as conservatives.

To compound the confusion of terms, when one takes the longer view, most contemporary conservatives come into focus as a species of liberal.

While differing routinely with progressives and sometimes with libertarians about how best to secure it, they, too, at least as a political matter, put individual freedom first. This is true of traditional conservatives, who are often religious and who see the principal benefit of putting freedom first as the conserving of inherited authorities and time-tested practices and institutions.

Both traditional conservatives and neoconservatives believe, somewhat paradoxically, that it is an excess of freedom or an excess of equality that is the chief menace to freedom. Because they share with libertarians the conviction that government is a major threat to individual rights, traditional conservatives and neoconservatives champion limited government. But because they also believe strongly that discipline and standards are crucial to individual well-being and the health of a free society, they are willing to countenance here and there qualified government support for, and certainly seek to abolish laws that weaken, the institutions that they believe form the character necessary to self-government. Foremost among these institutions, most conservatives agree, are the family and religion.

To varying degrees, traditional conservatives and neoconservatives are also friends of markets and private initiative. But their friendship is not without its strains. To varying degrees, they warn of the threat to moral character posed by the rapid change, the celebration of consumption, and the transformation of goods into commodities characteristic of a market economy.

Serious differences between traditional conservatives and neoconservatives are most likely to arise concerning questions of foreign affairs. While both distrust encroachments on American sovereignty by international law and international institutions, traditional conservatives are more inclined to believe that US national security interests are best served by restricting America's role abroad, while neoconservatives generally think that national security, as well as moral principle, compel the United States to promote democracy around the world.

To observe that Left and Right in America are united by a deep and abiding liberalism should not be mistaken for the fatuous claim that despite our manifest differences, at bottom Americans all see eye-to-eye. To bring into focus the many-sidedness of the liberal spirit in America does, however, promote clarity in understanding, civility in debate, and pride in the vigor of our experiment in free, democratic government.

The writer teaches at George Mason University School of Law and is a research fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution. He is the author of *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism*.