

Politicizing Reason

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Robert B. Reich.

Reason: Why Liberals Will Win the Battle for America.

Alfred A. Knopf. 257 pages. \$24.00

Robert Reich is the nearest American left-liberalism has come in this generation to producing a scholar-statesman. He is a Rhodes Scholar, a graduate of Yale Law School, an author of important works on the transformation of American economic life in the information age, a former secretary of labor in the Clinton administration, and currently a University Professor at Brandeis University and Maurice B. Hexter Professor of Social and Economic Policy at Brandeis's Heller Graduate School. As a scholar and statesman, and a privileged member of the intellectual and cultural elite, he might have been at pains to produce a measured, temperate volume — particularly one devoted to making the case for liberalism and entitled (no less) Reason. Yet his Reason actually bears a stunning resemblance to, of all things, Ann Coulter's most recent book, *Treason* (Crown Forum, 2003). Coulter, a notoriously ferocious right-wing attack dog, has earned her fame and fortune lashing out at the left on cable tv talk shows and in newspaper columns and best-selling books. While her broadsides are pitched to ordinary people and are easily seen for the partisan harangues they are meant to be, Reich's come disguised as considered analysis. Still, like Coulter, he depends on relentless caricature of his opponents; like her, he insists that his opinions reflect what is truly American while those of the other side embody un-American attitudes and ideas; and like her, he believes that his political proposals are necessary to rescue the country from ruin.

Although both display illiberal temperaments, she comes to bury liberalism and he to save it. Although both have written intensely polemical books, Reich has no doubts that the scorn he heaps upon his political foes, the moral superiority to which he lays claim, and the program he offers for restoring America to the one true path flow directly from pure and universal reason. And although both do a disservice to the liberalism that undergirds the American political order, his accusations, disguised as serious thinking, further undermine an already very broken-down distinction between partisan harangue and thoughtful inquiry.

Reich was provoked to write by the rise of what he characterizes as “radical conservatives.” Whereas true conservatives are cautious, sober, and averse to change, “the Radcons,” as he calls them throughout his book, aim to drastically remake America. They represent not simply one of many competing strands within this nation's web of party politics, but rather an “assault on America.” They have waged a long and sinister and all-too-successful

counterrevolution against the 1960s, which they see as the spawning ground of all they loathe in America and which they denounce with the term “liberalism.” In fact, argues Reich, liberalism is the name of “a great and essential tradition,” but it has been “mocked and grossly distorted” by conservatives. Today, thanks to the presidency of George W. Bush and their domination of all three branches of government, conservatives are “taking over the public agenda.” Such is the menace they present that opposition to them is nothing less than a “battle for America.” Thus far, liberals have provided “woefully little resistance.” But all is not lost. Upholders of progressive liberalism in America will win this battle, Reich vows, because “we have reason on our side, which is more than the Radcons can honestly claim.”

Indeed, Reich believes that his is not only the one true liberalism but the public expression of reason itself. So as a man of reason and therefore a progressive liberal, he sets out to give Radcon ideas a “fair hearing” in order to show why they are “dangerously wrong.”

And thus his fair hearing: All conservatives in America think alike and speak with one terrifying voice. Their radical outlook is proclaimed on the “the editorial pages of the Wall Street Journal, Weekly Standard, Washington Times, New York Post, and New York Sun.” Their leading spokesmen are talk-show hosts Michael Savage and Rush Limbaugh, the Reverend Jerry Falwell, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, former Solicitor General Robert Bork, social critic William Bennett, Weekly Standard editor William Kristol, and, of course, Coulter herself. They promulgate a doctrine that “is dramatically out of sync with the needs of America and the world.” Their doctrine is comprehensive and of one piece. It reaches from public morality to the economy to foreign affairs. It calls for regulating the sex lives of citizens, cutting taxes on the wealthy, slashing social services for the needy, pursuing a bullying unilateralism abroad, and stifling dissent and crushing civil liberties at home.

But it is more than adherence to these policies that defines for Reich today’s radical conservatives. Their hallmark is the manner in which they adhere to them. Conservatives in America, he maintains, believe with “fervent certainty” that their policies are “correct and necessary,” and they exhibit “disdain for those who disagree.” Speaking in the name of reason, and therefore obliged to say only what is correct and necessary, Reich eschews vulgar generalization: “I don’t mean to tar all Radcons with the intemperate words of a few.” Yet he lacks the self-restraint to finish the paragraph without succumbing to the temptation: “What unites them is their stridency and meanness.”

The ugliness of conservative language and convictions, Reich warns, is corrupting the body politic:

[W]hat we're now witnessing is something far more corrosive of civic life than the normal political vitriol: It's a viciousness directed at anyone holding a view other than the prevailing radical conservatism. Insults are also calculated to belittle and ridicule entire groups who have relatively little power in our society — blacks, the poor, Hispanic-Americans, Arab-Americans, immigrants. Or who are judged to be “different” — gays, feminists, Muslims.

This kind of generalized venom closes off reasoned debate, chills dissent, and cuts people off from one another. It is especially dangerous to democracy when it's bankrolled by large amounts of money; when its perpetrators ally themselves ideologically with those who run our government; when it so dominates the media — talk radio, talk television, books, and the Internet — that the public hears and sees little else; and when it's repeated so often it becomes the accepted norm. Unfortunately, all of this is now the case.

Indeed, the poison of bigoted and bullying conservative rhetoric has spread well beyond politics and public life to defile our morals and inmost selves: “The mindless, mean-spirited trash talk that fills Radcon books and radio and television broadcasts panders to the worst in us and demeans us all.”

Why are today's conservatives “so often vicious and uncompromising”? Their defects stem not from cynicism or calculation, according to Reich, but from a more dangerous source — the sincere belief that they know what lies in the public interest. And above all, he says, conservative doctrine teaches that what lies in the public interest is the fight against evil, or rather against a particular and extreme interpretation of evil:

To Radcons, the major threat to the security of our nation, the stability of our families, our future prosperity, and the capacity of our children to grow into responsible adults is a dark, satanic force. It exists within America in the form of moral deviance — out of wedlock births, homosexuality, abortion, crime. It potentially exists within every one of us in the form of sloth and devastating irresponsibility. It exists outside America in the form of “evil empires” or an “axis of evil.”

Fanaticism is the fruit of this theological vision: “There's no compromising with such evil. It has to be countered with everything we have. Religious faith and discipline are the means of redemption. Punishment and coercion are the only real determinants. Fear is the essential motivator.” Reich invokes President Reagan's famous characterization of the Soviet Union and President Bush's equally blunt description of Iraq, Iran, and North Korea to underscore his assertion that theologically driven radicalism reflects not the fringe but the mainstream of conservatism in America.

Turning from style and fundamental beliefs to policy Reich argues that on the question of public morality conservatives believe that its principal topic ought to be sex and that sex ought to be placed under strict legal regulation. Sex outside of marriage, abortion, children born out of wedlock, divorce, homosexuality, and gay marriage, in Reich's iteration of the

conservative litany, “should be banned or discouraged by law, and condemned by society as a whole.” By contrast, he believes that “[t]here is moral rot in America but it’s not found in the private behavior of ordinary people. It’s located in the public behavior of people at or near the top.” Conservatives refuse to take seriously as a matter of public morality not only the “exorbitant pay” of top executives, but also, Reich contends, such clearly criminal wrongdoing as fraudulent accounting and stock manipulation, insider trading, tax evasion, and bribery of public officials. Here, as throughout his book, Reich falls prey to the fallacy of “either/orism:” Either public morality is about sex and the family or it is about the abuse of economic power and political office, as if public policy typically posed a clear choice between two extreme and opposed alternatives.

Reich dismisses the proposition that the way we live as families affects the way we conduct ourselves as citizens as “paternalistic bull.” In his view, “the decline in marriage is no more a public issue than is the rise in premarital sex.” But what makes him so certain? If the decline in marriage impairs our capacity to rear healthy, well-adjusted children, why shouldn’t the public take notice? Certainly the liberal tradition, the tradition of Locke and Mill, of which he regards himself as an authentic heir and faithful spokesman, repeatedly affirms the connection. Of course, there are good reasons, notwithstanding the dependence of public life on it, to refrain from legislating private morality. This distinction, crucial to a sound liberalism — between the relevance of a belief, practice, or association to public life and the appropriateness of regulating it by law — is lost on Reich and trampled underfoot by his analysis.

Still, despite denouncing the proposition, Reich clearly agrees with conservatives that there is a complex connection between private life in the home and public morality. After all, he favors the legalization of gay marriage, and he was pleased as secretary of labor to implement the Family and Medical Leave Act, which mandates time off for working parents to be with children who are ill or otherwise in need. Support of the family is, in his view, very much a responsibility of the federal government. Where the progressive Reich and American conservatives differ is over what is best for the family and how the federal government should support it. So, too, with respect to what he calls “the real scandal of executive pay.” The enormous earnings gap to which he angrily calls attention — “Why did top executives go from earning 42 times what an average hourly worker took home in 1980, to 85 times as much in 1990, to more than 280 times as much now?” — certainly is no crime, and Reich does not advocate criminalizing it. The gap is immoral because it “encourages everyone to act selfishly, even when widespread selfishness imperils the entire system.” Clearly Reich agrees with conservatives that private morality is a matter of public interest. What he seems unwilling to acknowledge is that their alarm about the family does not preclude concern about wrongdoing in the marketplace, or that combatting corporate or official misconduct does not require one to avert one’s eyes to the problems besetting the American family.

Moreover, he ignores the fact that conservatives are sharply split on the question of the public regulation of sex and family life. Although George W. Bush favors a constitutional amendment restricting marriage to a man and a woman, many others oppose such a measure on the good federalist and conservative grounds that the Constitution is not a tool of social policy and that decisions about marriage and the family are, as they traditionally have been, best left to the states. In addition, by casually lumping together the discouraging of some sex-related conduct with the banning of it, Reich's formulation elides the crucial distinction between them. There is a world of difference between advocating abstinence education and outlawing premarital sex.

His critique of conservative economic policy and his defense of the progressive alternative are similarly untethered from the realities of American politics. "Radcons insist on privatizing social insurance, cutting social services, and giving large tax breaks mainly to people who are rich." They are heartless Social Darwinists who believe that "it's perfectly appropriate that the poor should get less money and the rich more because the poor have no inherent virtue." Progressive liberals are their antitheses in every way: They seek to care for the poor, the disadvantaged, and those who are unable to help themselves by increasing social insurance, expanding social services, and increasing taxes on the rich.

Given his determination to divide the world into good guys and bad guys, it is startling to find Reich pausing, briefly, to recognize a division of labor in American political life. In a competitive market economy, he observes, social insurance is necessary to bail out those who have lost the capacity to compete or who have been upended by the economic storms to which capitalism is prone. At the same time, the presence of a safety net, he notes, inevitably makes people less vigilant, less careful to avoid harm's way. Consequently, and contrary to the overwhelming tendency of his book, Reich says that the challenge that therefore confronts policymakers is one of balancing competing considerations: "How do we square the natural human tendency to be less careful when protected against the full consequences of one's actions with the genuine need for some protection." The political solution in a liberal democracy, Reich maintains in this moment of startling sobriety, is a synthesis of the typically progressive principle and the typically conservative principle:

Liberals tend to emphasize the need for protection; conservatives, the need for responsibility. Both sides have a point. The best policy is usually a balance between the two: Cushion people against losses, but don't make the cushion so comfortable they fail to take reasonable precaution. (That's partly why insurance companies require people to pay the first portion of the cost of an accident or prescription as a "co-payment," and why unemployment insurance is limited to a certain number of weeks at a fraction of one's previous salary.)

Even so, he concludes by declaring that the conservative economic agenda is all wrong and the progressive agenda is completely right. Between progressives and conservatives, it appears, there is no legitimate matter to debate about taxes, growth, and the right mix of private and public investment in human capital.

Conservative opinions about America and its relation to other nations, argues Reich, are even more extreme. “Theirs is a shallow patriotism that derives its emotional force from disdain for foreign cultures and confronting foreign opponents. As such, it imperils the future security of America and the world.” The “negative patriotism” of the conservatives “wants Americans to do better and be better than anyone else.” In contrast, progressives endorse a “positive patriotism.” It “involves a special concern about the well-being of other Americans, but not necessarily to the exclusion of others around the world.” Whereas negative patriotism “automatically sets nation against nation, culture against culture,” positive patriotism, in accordance with “the American tradition of liberal internationalism,” seeks to unite the world under the rule of law.

In short, left-liberals like himself are, according to Reich, both in the principles they cherish and in the virtues they exhibit, the very opposite of conservatives. They favor free speech and open public discussion. They value civility and fair debate. They are humble in the face of the uncertainties and complexities of moral and political life. And they are generous in their concern for, and sympathetic understanding of, others.

Particularly in light of the momentous events of the past three years, the crudeness of these assertions is staggering. Reich insists he thinks conservatives are sincere in their beliefs and recognizes the importance of giving their views a “fair hearing.” Yet in fact he gives them no quarter, despite countless speeches by President Bush and others proclaiming the good of human freedom and equality and America’s interest, both strategic and moral, in building a more democratic Iraq and a more democratic Middle East. Reich goes so far as to suggest that the liberation of Iraq aims at domination and exploitation of an inferior people, while a truly fair hearer could reasonably conclude that the Bush administration may have been carried away by progressive hopes in Iraq and by the belief in the openness of all peoples to freedom and democracy.

How could a man of Reich’s education and political achievements have gone so terribly wrong? Although he rarely mentions the president’s name, part of the answer surely lies in the Bush hatred that is rampant among Democrats. Of course, hatred has a rich history in American politics, but Reich’s Reason is a specimen of a new kind of hatred. It can be observed on prominent editorial pages, in opinion magazines, in the speeches of Democratic party leaders, and among the party faithful. It is justified as an imperative of reason and an expression of moral purity.

The new hatred does not reflect an inevitable deterioration of the progressive mind. It has become an epidemic as the result of contingent events: partisan fury over Bush vs. Gore and passionate opposition to the war in Iraq. A deep distaste for the president’s Christian faith and Texas sensibility are contributing factors as well. But at root is the unspoken dogma that

informs and incites the progressive mind: Religion is false and degrading, tradition is oppressive, and democracy and true freedom consist not in what the people prefer but in what elite scholars and statesmen conclude is in their best interests.

Here and there one finds a better, fairer, truly liberal Reich, one who recognizes that the story of contemporary American politics is not so simple; that at any one moment the party of the left or the party of the right might be in a better position to lead the nation; that there are important truths to be found on both sides of the political aisle; that both camps have their idiosyncracies, excesses, and blind spots. For the most part, though, he proceeds with an unhinged progressivism that not only betrays the liberal tradition but in the process harms conservatism in America by depriving it of a worthy rival. Alas, Reich's misrepresentations obscure the kernel of truth in his critique. In fact, it is right to warn that conservatives have a tendency to focus on the culture of permissiveness in intimate relations and to neglect the culture of entitlement in corporate boardrooms. It is right to argue that conservatives tend to lose focus on the reasons why, in our post-industrial liberal democracy, providing a floor of care for the least well-off is a moral obligation and prudential imperative that government cannot forgo. And it is right to criticize those conservatives who suggest that criticism of the Bush administration is unpatriotic. But it is outrageous to present the excesses and deficiencies of conservatives in America as the very essence of American conservatism.

Yet this is just what Robert Reich has done. He has busied himself — a la Coulter — with gathering every outrageous assertion, ill-conceived idea, and ugly sentiment uttered by a conservative in the last decade and a half and stitched them together to form a hideous creature, a Radcon. Instead of striving to examine the diversity of conservative opinions and perspectives, he has dismissed them as a single, wholly negative entity. This is the corrupt technique of Michael Moore imported into the realm of serious nonfiction. It is an offense against the intellectual conscience. And in the name of a “bold new liberalism,” it dishonors the liberal spirit at a time when that spirit is sorely in need of principled defenders.