

## *The Chronicle Review*

### **The Liberal Moment**

By E.J. DIONNE JR.

Partisans of the left are prone to extended bouts of doubt, introspection, and self-criticism that are nonetheless rooted in a view that the ultimate triumph of their cause is inevitable, that history is on their side.

Consider these thoughtful warnings from an important author on the left: "First of all," he wrote, "the next left cannot assume that there is a spontaneous, homogeneous majority that need only become conscious of itself in order to play a central political role in Western society." Instead, the left must embrace a program that "will radically improve the conditions of life of *everyone* in the society," because "the politics of *noblesse oblige* simply will not mobilize a majority that includes a very large number of people who are not poor yet are still suffering from relative deprivation." Finally, the author said, the left "cannot content itself to sit around waiting for some catastrophe to save it from its own political impotence."

Those are not recent words. They were written by the late Michael Harrington in *The Next Left: The History of a Future*, published in 1986. Note that even in the midst of the Reagan era, Harrington was confident about where the future would take us. My own book published 10 years later, *They Only Look Dead: Why Progressives Will Dominate the Next Political Era*, appeared shortly after the rise of Newt Gingrich and the Republican Congress. It was, if anything, even more bullish about what history had in store for the liberal-left.

Suddenly, those who foresaw a progressive future in the United States have a lot of company. American liberals and the left now have their greatest political opening since the 1960s and their greatest opportunity to alter the philosophical direction of the public debate since the 1930s. That is no longer an eccentric view. One knows the winds are changing when *The Economist* runs a cover story under the headline, "Is America Turning Left?" Only a few years ago, *The Economist* foresaw a long-term realignment to the right and was rhapsodic about the staying power of the American conservative movement and the intellectual dominance of conservative ideology. Something has changed.

That something is the administration of George W. Bush, the "catastrophe" — to use Harrington's formulation — that has saved the left from "political impotence." Voters, unlike theorists, respond less to ideas than to performance, less to grand promises than to results. They look to political parties and movements, as the Republican pollster David Winston likes to say, less as repositories of ideology than as tools to solve problems. The tools of Republican conservatism are broken, shattered on the false expectations of easy victory in Iraq, on the abject failures in New Orleans, and on the overreach of a brand of moral conservatism ill-suited to a moderate country.

But something else is true as well: The conservative triumphalism of recent years was itself never justified. Then-House Majority Leader Tom DeLay was ebullient the day after the 2004

elections: "The Republican Party is a permanent majority for the future of this country," DeLay declared. "We're going to be able to lead this country in the direction we've been dreaming of for years."

The optimism of DeLay and Karl Rove, the president's recently departed political maestro, who foresaw a long-term realignment to the right, rested on the assumption that between the late 1970s and 2004, conservative ideology had largely triumphed, and conservative political forces had outmaneuvered the left. The liberal-left often accepted that its own contradictions were more profound than those afflicting the right.

As a result, the 1990s, the time of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair's Third Way, have largely been written off as a mere episode in the long conservative march. Those who criticized the Third Way from the left saw it primarily as a capitulation to the Reagan-Thatcher settlement. Conservatives were seen as having won a series of intellectual and ideological victories. Markets were seen as preferable to government action. The fall of Soviet Communism was interpreted on the right as marking the failure of all forms of state intervention in the economic market. The stagflation of the late 1970s and early 1980s was widely interpreted as a failure of Keynesian economics, opening the way to supply-side theory, a rationale (or rationalization) for cutting taxes on the wealthy. Conservatives established themselves as the tough stewards of American and Western interests in the world, casting their opponents on the left as vacillating and generally untrustworthy. And conservatives argued that a cultural crisis demanded a sharp reaction against the "permissive" values of the 1960s.

Such claims endowed conservatism with public vigor and an immense self-confidence. Liberals were often forced into a defensive litany of "no's": No, we're not permissive; no, we're not weak abroad; no, we're not for big, overweening government; no, we don't hate capitalism or entrepreneurship; no, we don't want to tax people to death.

Yet the energy on the right was deceptive. For one thing, the electoral evidence for a shift to conservatism was weak. Bush, after all, first took the White House following a disputed election in which he lost the popular vote. Absent flawed ballot designs and a friendly U.S. Supreme Court, he would have lost Florida and the Electoral College as well. Even in 2004, as president in a time of war, Bush scraped up less than 51 percent of the popular vote.

The left's pessimism was also based on a faulty reading of the 1990s as a uniformly conservative period. In fact, Clinton's years in office provided a hint of the progressive possibility. A new moderate left seemed poised to win influence across the industrial world — its triumphs were notable in Britain, Germany, and Italy, and also in Spain and Scandinavia. If the Clinton promise was never fully met — the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994 blocked the president from pursuing a progressive program, and the scandals at the end of his term prevented him from taking advantage of his 1996 re-election victory — that did not mean it did not exist. The Blair years in Britain were in some ways a more successful effort to create a new majority on the center-left, rooted in the quest for a Third Way, even if the prime minister's popularity tumbled after his decision to join Bush in the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

It should be remembered that Clinton and Blair set their faces against "ideology," not only as a defensive ploy but also to mount an offensive against the inconsistencies and contradictions of the right. Some of the very same contradictions — ambiguities about "big government," efforts to use the energies of the religious right without turning off moderates, the splits between neoconservatives and realists on foreign policy — are at the heart of the conservative fall from grace since 2004.

It is a mark of the relative weakness of the conservative cause that Bush's approval ratings were mediocre on September 10, 2001. The terrorist attacks the next day transformed politics, in the United States as well as elsewhere, to the immense benefit of Bush and to the disadvantage of the liberal-left.

With the exception of a tiny fringe, the American left rallied to the battle against Islamist terrorism, and so did most of the European left. The mood of solidarity was captured by a headline in *Le Monde*, a French paper not known for its support of American foreign policy, "We are all Americans," over a heartfelt essay by the editor in chief, Jean-Marie Colombani.

Sam Tanenhaus, the editor of the *The New York Times Book Review*, notes in a recent essay in *The New Republic*, "The End of the Journey," that Bush himself spoke in broadly internationalist terms after the attacks. "Bush," Tanenhaus writes, "gave us reason to believe he would draw on the most measured strains of cold-war policy." Bush's rhetoric was, if one dare use the term, multilateral. "America will never forget the sounds of our national anthem playing at Buckingham Palace, on the streets of Paris, and at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate," the president said on September 20, 2001. For perfectly good reasons, the bruising battles between left and right were largely suspended in the months after 9/11.

Then came the decision to wage war in Iraq, which, initially, badly splintered the liberal-left. Some in its ranks supported the war on humanitarian grounds (because of the evil of Saddam Hussein's regime) and in the hope of expanding democracy. That view animates the British journalist Nick Cohen's book this year, *What's Left: How Liberals Lost Their Way* (Fourth Estate), a powerful polemic against double standards on the left. Cohen argues against a relativism — he sees it rooted in postmodernist scholarship — that refuses to place the same liberal, feminist, and democratic demands on radical Islamic movements that it has historically imposed upon Western conservatives and reactionaries.

But many who are just as wary as Cohen is of such double standards opposed the war out of mistrust of the Bush administration, its sweeping claims on behalf of a unilateralist American response to terrorism, and a well-placed fear that the administration was not prepared to deal with the chaos that an American invasion of Iraq would leave in its wake.

As Tanenhaus, no defender of the far left, notes in his article, Bush's initial internationalism was "replaced within a year by the suffocating unilateralism of the 'Bush Doctrine' of 'pre-emptive' license." As a result, "the actual dangers we faced from militant Islam were blurred into a generalized atmosphere of apocalyptic crisis." Lost, Tanenhaus added, were "[e]ssential distinctions, and the wisdom with which they were made."

In *Return to Greatness: How America Lost Its Sense of Purpose and What It Needs to Do to Recover It* (Princeton University Press, 2005), the Boston College political scientist Alan Wolfe summarized the rage of the liberal-left (as distinguished from the anger found at the farther reaches of the left influenced by Noam Chomsky): "The War in Iraq gave liberals an extreme case of foreign-policy whiplash; no sooner had they taken the giant step toward support of military intervention abroad than the incompetence and arrogance of the Bush administration led them to question whether this was the right intervention at the right time." The neoconservatives "who prepared the intellectual turf for the invasion of Iraq had no qualms about relying on military force, but their refusal to supplement it with other forms of power, including the kinds of 'soft power' associated with diplomacy, proved fatal to their cause." It never seemed to dawn on the neoconservatives, Wolfe added, "that if Iraq was a test case, failure could be just as much an outcome as success, and that if such a failure occurred, it would not only undermine American power, but the theory of American power that accompanied it."

As Wolfe suggests, the reaction against Bush and neoconservatism among American progressives is rooted not in the ultraleftism that Cohen condemns but in a realistic appraisal of the bitter results of Bush's policy failures. If elements of the European left represented by Cohen feel a generous instinct to defend America against anti-Americanism and European Bush-bashing, much of the American left feels betrayed by Bush's political manipulation of patriotic feelings that even the most committed progressives experienced after the terrorist attacks. The Columbia University sociologist Todd Gitlin's 2006 book, *The Intellectuals and the Flag* (Columbia University Press), is a particularly eloquent rendering of the inevitable and proper post-9/11 patriotism that affected the left no less than the right or the center.

Even before support for Bush's Iraq policies collapsed and even before Hurricane Katrina made landfall, three other controversies weakened the foundations of his presidency — and of the conservative cause.

First, Bush's decision to push for the partial privatization of Social Security was a choice rooted in ideology that called forth a vigorous defense of social insurance. The more Bush discussed that boutique idea, inspired by conservative think tanks, the less the public liked it. Bush was proposing to weaken guaranteed pensions at a moment when many Americans were experiencing new levels of economic insecurity described by the Yale University political scientist Jacob S. Hacker in *The Great Risk Shift* (Oxford University Press, 2006). Hacker notes that more and more financial risk has been thrown onto individual Americans as collective safety nets, particularly those provided by private employers for pensions and health care, have been shredded. On May 16, 2005, *BusinessWeek*, hardly a socialist bastion, sought to explain, as the headline put it, "Why so many Americans aren't buying into Bush's Ownership Society." It turned out that one of the liberal-left's oldest commitments, to a certain degree of social provision, was both up-to-date and popular in an increasingly uncertain economic time.

Second, the decision of the president and a Republican Congress to use federal power to overrule a state-court decision allowing the death of Terri Schiavo, who was deemed brain-dead, was far more damaging than it seemed at the time. Even social moderates and conservatives were uneasy with heavy-handed federal intervention in a matter that seemed more properly handled within families and by state governments. Even opponents of physician-assisted suicide did not view the

case as clear-cut. They sensed that the moralistic language used by conservative politicians was inspired not by deep conviction but by the frantic pursuit of a key constituency's votes.

Last was the controversy over leaking the name of Valerie Plame, the CIA operative married to former Ambassador Joseph Wilson. The case came to symbolize the administration's approach to its critics on Iraq. At the very moment when doubts about the war were building, here was an incident that seemed to embody all that was wrong with the administration's approach to selling a war that, initially at least, a majority of Americans did not consider either wise or necessary.

All of this happened before Katrina, an administration failure that carried so many messages: lack of respect for the fundamental functions of government and incompetence at executing its most basic tasks; seeming indifference to the plight of the poor and to the situation of African-Americans; rampant cronyism. The source of Bush's political success after 9/11 had been his claim that he could protect Americans. Leadership, strength, and security were his calling cards. They were lost in the Gulf's surging waters.

The end of the Bush era — and, by extension, the conservative era — point to both the opportunities and the challenges for American liberalism and the left. Paul Starr was right to note in an essay in *The American Prospect* that "the exhaustion of conservatism is not tantamount to a liberal revival." Starr, co-editor of the magazine and a sociologist at Princeton University, correctly framed the challenge as "whether liberals can make their case not just for specific policies and candidates but for an alternative public philosophy."

To do so, they must first rediscover the power of their own ideas and their own tradition. Unlike conservatives, American liberals have been reluctant to embrace their past, partly because the very word "liberal" has been so successfully demonized. "Even liberals at times appear uncertain about their convictions," Starr writes in *Freedom's Power: The True Force of Liberalism* (Basic Books, 2007). Starr's powerful book and the collection edited by the historians Neil Jumonville and Kevin Mattson, *Liberalism for a New Century* (University of California Press, 2007) — to which I contributed a foreword — are both efforts to engage confidently with the achievements of American liberalism and their relevance to the current moment.

At the same time, liberals will be required to deal with a set of conflicts and contradictions not unlike the ones that have derailed conservatism.

Although the most ardent battles between multiculturalism and universalism are found in the academy, they have a bearing on practical politics. That is especially true in Europe, where the rules, traditions, and assumptions of liberal societies are being tested by radical Islamists. Liberals will inevitably face a tension between the imperative to stand up for the rights of minority groups — that most certainly includes the rights of Muslims in Western societies — and the liberal commitment to root the rights of all in a set of universal values and principles. The former often *looks like* particularism when it is in fact based on universalism. Efforts to vindicate the rights of individual members of disadvantaged groups are almost always pushed forward through group self-assertion and group solidarity. In the United States, "Black Is Beautiful" and "Sisterhood Is Powerful" were slogans about groups that arose within struggles for individual civil rights. Yet liberalism necessarily insists on the limits of what one might call

"groupness," because individuals should be able to exercise rights within their own groups. The intellectual historian Mark Lilla's new book *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics and the Modern West* (Random House, 2007) is a powerful reminder of how hard it will be to mediate the intellectual — and thus political — conflicts between the assumptions of the liberal West and the assertions of newly powerful political theologies, particularly, though not only, within Islam.

Liberalism's commitment to economic justice and greater equality demands the recognition of common ground that transcends any particular identity. Gitlin offered a classic liberal-left complaint against particularism and multiculturalism when he wrote in *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (Metropolitan Books): "[T]he Left, which once stood for universal values, seems to speak today for select identities, while the Right, long associated with privileged interests, claims to defend the common good."

Gitlin was writing in 1995, and if there has been a clear shift since then among liberals and on the left, it is toward a "common good" politics that seeks *not* to abandon a commitment to minority rights but to embed them in a larger and more inclusive program of social justice. "We're in this together" is the closing theme of Starr's book, and of the liberal writer Michael Tomasky's widely noted 2006 essay in *The American Prospect*, "Party in Search of a Notion." Tomasky argued that progressives need to stand for more than "diversity and rights" — and that both would be better defended within a common-good framework.

Liberals and the left see democratic government as a constructive force for achieving that common good, and, in that respect, the discrediting of government in the Bush years is far from an unalloyed benefit for progressives. As the Democratic pollster Stanley B. Greenberg has argued, the paradox "is that conservatives have failed in ways that have undermined Americans' sense of collective capacity. Their failure has communicated not just their own incompetence, but also the message that government in general is incompetent." As a result, "conservatives have created a significant roadblock for Democrats: They have undermined people's faith in the very instrument that we as progressives want to use to solve problems." Absent the restoration of a popular sense of "collective capacity," liberals and the left will be lost.

American liberals and European social democrats must also confront their own ambivalence about the global economy, even if they are right to be ambivalent. They welcome the rising living standards in the Third World that economic integration, properly organized, could achieve, yet they mourn the way in which globalization — as it is currently organized — has undermined the capacity of national governments to regulate and redistribute in the common interest. They worry that this process has diminished the bargaining power of the least privileged in the wealthy nations.

A revival of liberalism depends upon a coherent approach to globalization. It should promote the creation of democratic social-market economies that marry competitiveness to social justice. Starr is right when he says that the "primary purposes of social policy are to narrow the inequalities generated in the marketplace and to reduce the impact on personal security and life chances of adverse events such as sickness, disability, and unemployment." Achieving those goals is more difficult in a globalized market. That explains why the European left is so

challenged and why even an empowered American liberalism will face difficulties in keeping its core promises.

And after Bush leaves office, liberals will face a moment of truth on foreign policy. It is easy enough to reject Bush's unilateralism, his squandering of the post-9/11 opportunity, his failure to understand what the invasion of Iraq entailed and required, his expansive view of executive power. Far more difficult will be settling arguments between advocates of democracy promotion and opponents of imperialism; between realists who have learned the need for prudence from the Iraq adventure, and idealists who insist (as in Darfur) that there is still a role for American power to promote moral ends, and to avert moral catastrophe.

In principle, American liberals can repair the model of international cooperation pioneered by Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. But it would be foolish to assume that such an approach to foreign policy can be miraculously recreated in a world very different from the one they confronted, or to assume that the dilemmas of liberal foreign policy will disappear when the Bush administration does.

I list these problems not because I believe that liberals face an impossible situation, but precisely because I am hopeful about the prospects of a progressive renewal. Its success will require the left to face its contradictions honestly, explain its principles clearly, and offer solutions fearlessly.

"At periodic moments in our history," Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. wrote in 1960, "our country has paused on the threshold of a new epoch in our national life, unable for a moment to open the door, but aware that it must advance if it is to preserve its national vitality and identity. One feels that we are approaching such a moment now — that the mood which has dominated the nation for a decade is beginning to seem thin and irrelevant; that it no longer interprets our desires and needs as a people; that new forces, new energies, new values are straining for expression and for release." That time has come again.

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