POST-LIBERALISM
The Death of a Dream

Melvyn L. Fein
With a new preface by the author
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It is true that you may fool all of the people some of the time; you can even fool some of the people all of the time; but you can’t fool all of the people all the time.

—Abraham Lincoln
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Preface to the Paperback Edition

Liberalism may be dying, but it is obviously taking a very long time to expire. In the meantime, its tentacles have invaded nearly every aspect of our society. So many of its minions are entrenched in our political, educational, and cultural institutions that they are difficult to extirpate. Indeed, the last several years have demonstrated just how intractable their belief system can be. Despite an unprecedented series of failures, liberalism continues to dominate our national agenda. As a result, a continuous barrage of promises and insults assault our ears. These, however, are a sign of desperation, not of confidence.

And yet there is good news. Liberalism is committing suicide. Its most dedicated supporters are in the process of destroying its credibility. In their stout defense of the indefensible, they have highlighted the bankruptcy of their ideology. Over the last several years, they have made so many blunders and told so many lies that it is difficult for any but the most the most hardened fanatics to overlook their incompetence. It is with good reason that most Americans are convinced that our country is moving in the wrong direction.

In Post-Liberalism, I argued that cognitive dissonance has promoted rampant denial among the true believers. As the facts go against them, they more stridently insist that all is well. The Obama administration has thus piled its canards ever more deeply. Did we get hope and change? Has our health system been repaired or our reputation been enhanced in foreign lands? Is this the most transparent government in American history? The realities argue otherwise.

So what has been the response? We are now told that Radical Islamists will lose a recruiting tool if we close the Guantanamo Bay prison, even though they continued to sever heads after the release of top commanders. We are assured that millions of new jobs are being created, despite the fact that job participation is lower than it has been in decades. The way the liberals tell it, they are all that stands between
us and raging injustice. They must consequently man the barricades or else oppression will stalk our streets.

But consider some of the things that have happened on their watch. The Internal Revenue Service has targeted taxpayers because of their political affiliations. The Veterans Administration has allowed wounded soldiers to die on faked waiting lists. An American ambassador was not protected when terrorists attacked him in an American compound. The president drew a Red Line in Syria and then, against the recommendations of his advisors, pretended he never had. Likewise millions of illegal immigrants have flooded our borders and been allowed to remain unmolested irrespective of the crimes they committed. Nonetheless, we are told that there is in this not a smidgeon of corruption in any of this.

Barack Obama guaranteed that Americans could keep their doctors and their health plans under the Affordable Care Act. He also certified that the costs would go down. We were similarly informed that the website on which people could enroll would be as easy to navigate as Amazon.com. Although none of this came to pass, we are still being told that Obama Care is a roaring success. Many of its exchanges are going broke, but this is a hiccup in the broader scheme of things.

As for foreign policy, the accomplishments are routinely applauded. Obviously Al-Qaida is on the run and ISIS has not become an existential threat. Although in two years we dropped fewer bombs on these radicals than we did on Saddam Hussein in two days, our policy of containment is working. Nor will Iran violate its agreement on refraining from building an atomic bomb. That the Ayatollahs are testing rockets capable of delivering such a weapon is no problem. That this breaches a United Nations resolution is beside the point. Liberals still believe that if we are nice to our adversaries, they will eventually be nice to us. Russia will step back from the Ukrainian border and China will stop converting artificial islands into airbases. They will, at long last, get on the right side of history.

Although most Americans do not believe that our economy has recovered from the last recession, liberals insist that it has. Likewise although a majority of Americans realize that Obama is a feckless diplomat, his supporters believe that he earned his Nobel Peace Prize. The question is how long can this go on without people recognizing that liberal principles are responsible for a host of failures? Was Lincoln wrong to believe that you cannot fool all of the people all of the time? Will the liberals be able to get away with it?
Out in society at large, children are actually sent home from school for playing with imaginary guns, college students demand safe places where they will never hear an offensive word, and police officers are no longer allowed to defend themselves when they are attacked. Meanwhile protesters demand that Black Lives Matter, but tolerate robbery and homicide as natural accompaniments of being poor. By the same token, most Americans have accepted gay marriage; yet do little to stem the tidal wave of unwed parenthood. As for the government, it offers sympathy, but not much else, to these victims of liberal compassion.

If the Inverse Force Rule is correct, that is, if weak social forces are what hold large societies together, then we can expect the momentum toward a more centralized government to reverse. A hundred years ago Americans were becoming aware of the danger of concentrating too much power in the hands of industrial titans. They began to support a progressive government to serve as a counterweight to unrestrained monopolies. Today it is the government that has become the rapacious behemoth. As its bureaucratic agencies have proliferated, they have become rigid and unresponsive. Empire building administrators care more about their perquisites than protecting the public. All this becomes more evident as we witness organizations such as the Environmental Protection Agency regulate mud puddles on family farms. These bureaus have become despotisms responsible only to themselves. Nor is our president retrained by a congress than cannot undo his executive actions. As long as he has a pen and a telephone, he does whatever he wishes.

Even so, if liberal oppression is to be prevented, decentralization must be capably implemented. We therefore need to foster a more broadly based professionalization. More of us have to learn to become self-motivated experts. This means that higher education needs to be rescued from liberal stultification. Instead of students demanding politically correct courses, we have to return to the ideal of a marketplace of ideas. A liberal McCarthyism must not be allowed to impose its version of censorship. Nor ought a self-satisfied media distort the information free citizens receive.

Personal honesty and responsibility are necessary if we are to sustain our mass techno-commercial democracy. So are strong families and universalized moral standards. These are not old-fashioned values. To the contrary, they are the best guardians of our hard won liberties. I therefore hope that, in some small way, this book contributes to a re-evaluation of our priorities. Liberals do not have a corner on
compassion or intelligence. Their smug belief that only they have good intentions or commons sense will, in fact, be their downfall. It underwrites a misguided, and self-defeating, inflexibility. The liberal point of view does not make sense. Fortunately there is another way to go. *Post-Liberalism* attempts to present this alternative.

Readers who are interested in further analysis may wish to consult my weekly column. It is available at *Professionalized.blogspot.com.*
A Premature Burial

Several years ago H. W. Brands wrote a small book entitled *The Strange Death of American Liberalism*. In it he argued that liberalism was on its way out. As a historian, he believed that America was reverting to its national heritage. Cognizant of the anti-governmental sentiments that motivated the Founding Fathers, Brands suggested that conservative attitudes were deeply ensconced in the national psyche. Thomas Jefferson, he reminded his readers, regarded a robust federal authority as anathema. The nation’s third president envisioned a country of independent yeoman farmers each of whom was sturdy enough to meet his (or her) own needs without submitting to the equivalent of a George III. Monarchy might be acceptable to fainthearted Europeans, but Americans who grew to maturity by taming a wild frontier possessed the courage to regulate their own fortunes. They did not require a central administration to tell them what to do.

According to Brands, liberalism is about governmental control. It seeks to concentrate social services in a central authority that is theoretically under the control of the people. As a result, liberals promise programs and regulations intended to promote personal welfare. They also dream of expanding social justice. Under their tutelage, representatives of the people will legislate projects to defend the weak from the strong. For liberals, the government is all-wise, all-knowing, and eternally beneficent. It is a friend that can be relied upon to thwart the greedy assaults of the wealthy because it is founded on the proposition that defending the natural rights of the individual is the central mission of a democratic government.

Yet, Brands argued, this attitude is of recent vintage. According to him, Americans have always been wary of aristocratic pretensions. They understood that a government strong enough to provide extensive benefits was strong enough to threaten their freedoms. Only practical necessity modified this attitude. The dangers presented first by the Civil
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War, then industrialization, the two World Wars, the Great Depression and finally the Cold War prompted them to turn to national authorities for services once jealously guarded by individuals. Despite their misgivings, they asked the federal government to provide security in an increasingly insecure world.

Nor were they disappointed in their hopes. After all, wasn’t it the federal government that rescued them from the Depression and then defeated the Axis powers? Wasn’t it also the federal government that gave them the War on Poverty, Civil Rights, and Social Security? Brands believed that the apogee of liberal success occurred during the Cold War. This was when the Soviet Union seemed most threatening. Only later, once government tendrils began to extend too deeply into the daily lives of ordinary citizens, did they rebel and embrace the Reagan counterrevolution. Ultimately, even Bill Clinton declared that the era of Big Government was over.

Nevertheless, like the reported death of Mark Twain, the demise of liberalism was greatly exaggerated. Liberalism is not dead. It is merely dying. As the election of Barack Obama demonstrated, liberal fervor can occasionally be as great as ever. The movement has merely entered a period of decline.

Death Throes

It was midmorning, and the sun was shining brightly into my suburban living room. All seemed right with the world as I sat reading a book. Consequently, I was unprepared for the strange crashing sound that assaulted my ears. It appeared to come from the large trapezoidal window that overlooked my front driveway; hence I got up to investigate. At first I saw nothing. But then in the middle of the pane, I noticed a mysterious smudge. Not quite certain of its origin, I leaned across the window seat to scrutinize it more closely. There, in the center of the smear, was a tiny feather. Almost too small to be seen, it impelled me to look down to determine if a bird had collided with the window. Sure enough, one had. It was lying on the concrete directly beneath my gaze. Unfortunately, I could not make out whether the creature remained alive. Only a firsthand inspection would reveal its condition.

Upon descending the front staircase, I quickly became aware that the diminutive creature was still living. But it was in a perilous state. Its small chest was heaving great sighs, while its head was contorted into an angular position. As best I could tell, it had broken its neck. Taken
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aback by this development, I wondered what to do. Should I bring the injured bird upstairs and nurse it back to health? Or should I move it to the side of the driveway and allow it to expire in peace? Unsure of which course to follow, I wandered toward the street to ponder my options. Within minutes, however, my attention was diverted by a commotion behind me. Surprisingly, it was the little bird thrashing about. Its wings were flapping so energetically it seemed poised to fly off. At this, I concluded I had been mistaken. The creature was less seriously injured than I imagined.

When I turned to walk toward it, however, I was met by another surprise. As suddenly as the thrashing began, it ended. By the time I reached the creature there was no movement at all. The little animal had died. Despite an astonishing burst of vigor, it was past saving. What I witnessed were its death throes. While fighting desperately to live, it expended its last ounce of energy. This brief show of vitality had been deceptive. What seemed to betoken a return to normality was the opposite. The creature’s struggle against death was actually evidence of its imminent passing.

This fatality was, in the great scheme of things, a minor tragedy. A piece of me mourned the death, but birds have short lives. Of far more consequence are the current death throes of liberalism. This enormously influential political movement, this fundamental source of contemporary Western ideals, is in the process of passing from the scene. Nevertheless, most people, including liberals, remain unaware of its impending collapse. From their viewpoint, liberalism is very much alive. Thus, when Senator Ted Kennedy passed from the scene, he was praised as the Last Lion of Liberalism. Television screens from coast to coast showed him defending the cause. There he was in the flush of youth declaring as stridently as ever that “[t]he dream will never die!” He believed it, as did many millions of his fellow liberals. For them, the dream is the touchstone of their existence. It is an eternal verity that will always be with us.

Yet appearances can be mistaken. At this instant, liberalism is undeniably vigorous. Indeed, not long ago it recaptured both the American Congress and the presidency. Moreover, it did so in dramatic fashion. Furthermore, it subsequently spent trillions of dollars to advance its aspirations. Nevertheless, it is thrashing about. Decidedly not in an unchallenged ascendency, within months of its greatest successes, it inspired a dynamic Tea Party Movement and then endured a terrible defeat in the midterm elections. As a result, just as with that tiny bird,
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The death of liberalism is not a new topic. Liberals are currently flapping wildly about in an attempt to ward off their inevitable death. Spitting invectives at their adversaries, fanning the flames of class warfare, and promising to come back stronger than ever, left-leaning activists may seem in robust health, yet their very forcefulness is evidence of an underlying weakness. Liberalism is, in fact, succumbing to a fatal malady. It is dying of “inconsistency poisoning.” Contrary to the declarations of its partisans, liberalism is not on the side of history. It is not the wave of the future. Far from being “progressive,” it is marching rapidly toward the rear.

Ironically, in seeking to defend the indefensible, liberal partisans are hastening this demise. For almost two centuries, they have accused capitalism of being riven by contradictions. As a result, they have awaited the self-immolation of a system regarded as terminally unjust. Yet it is liberalism that is about to meet this fate. Despite claims of representing the 99 percent, its defenders are unprepared to halt this suicidal plunge precisely because they are looking elsewhere. They are not seeking to repair what is broken because they do not perceive themselves as in trouble.

Liberals, for all their bravado, are about to pay the price for self-delusional inconsistencies. Far from heralding a brave new world, they seek to resurrect a very old one. Just as was the case with the Soviet Union, their collectivist political philosophy has grown sclerotic. Because it is grounded in decrepit totalitarian traditions, it too must founder on the shoals of uncongenial truths. Far from being inevitable, liberalism is about to perish thanks to its unstable internal architecture. Having broken its neck after crashing into what appeared to be a window of opportunity, the very expectations that fueled liberalism’s upward flight will ultimately destroy it. Needless to say, its advocates are fighting against this fate. They are determined to make their own predictions come true. Yet despite their efforts, they cannot ward off destiny. That which the facts of human existence will not permit, cannot become reality. Dreams grounded in a misunderstanding of the human condition are analogous to a broken neck. They too cut off vital life juices.

A Failed Prophesy

Liberals are idealists. They predict a glowing future once their aspirations are realized. According to them, after the petty rivalries of capitalism are laid to rest, the underlying goodness of humanity will come to the fore. In the words of Obama’s acceptance speech at the
Democratic nominating convention, “we must . . . rise or fall as one nation; [our] fundamental belief [must be] that I am my brother’s keeper; I am my sister’s keeper.” As for his critics, they foolishly dismissed this philosophy as so much “happy talk.” Yet their attitude merely fed “into the cynicism that we all have about government.” But we must not be fooled. We must instead “fix our eye not on what is seen, but what is unseen, that better place around the bend.” More recently, he has invoked the hallowed dream of total “fairness.” For him this must inspire a “New Nationalism” under which we rededicate ourselves to our mutual welfare.

Regrettably, liberals are not just idealists—they are utopians. They do not merely expect a better world, they long for a perfect one. As a result, they forecast a time when people will join hands to form a single family of humankind. And when this occurs, the conflicts and insecurities that have haunted our species will disappear as we realize our destinies are tied to a common global village. Much as Saint Thomas More once envisaged an island from which selfishness was banished, they expect government mediation to produce complete equality and endless prosperity. People will then cease vying to outdo one another and instead work for the common good. The difference between then and now is that Thomas More knew his island was a fantasy, whereas contemporary liberals genuinely believe their dreams will come true.

As troublesome as this utopianism is the fact that most liberals refuse to acknowledge counterevidence. Completely certain of their visions, they will not allow them to be disconfirmed. Those of More’s readers who believed his island paradise actually existed were soon disabused by the discoveries of the intrepid mariners then crossing the Atlantic. None came back with confirmation of an actual place called Utopia. Amazingly, today’s liberals, despite their intellectual pretensions, refuse to countenance similar journeys. They balk when asked to venture into uncongenial ideological territory. True believers of the most adamant sort, they are the secular equivalent of fundamentalist Christians. Theirs is a faith. It may be secular, but it is as independent of empirical verification as any religious belief system.

Why then do liberals refuse to see what is happening? Why, if liberalism is in its death throes, are those closest to its focal point unaware of this development? Could it be that liberalism is not really dying? Could it be that they know something less committed observers do not? Or is it that their faith induces a kind of moral blindness? Many
liberals are unquestionably intelligent. Many are even intellectuals. How then can they be oblivious to something so profound? The answer is that they are human. Just as their political aspirations are undermined by the human condition, so is their ability to see what they do not wish to see.

What is nowadays occurring politically was explored more than half a century ago by social psychologists. Back in 1956, Leon Festinger, Henry Reicken, and Stanley Schacter published a book entitled *When Prophecy Fails*. Based on research conducted two years earlier, the investigators scrutinized, not a political party, but a religious cult. They wondered what would happen when a worldwide catastrophe predicted by this group did not materialize. Would its adherents become disillusioned? Would the scales fall from their eyes? Or would they continue to believe in a misguided faith? The answer turned out to be the latter. Most of its members strengthened their commitment. Their convictions, far from being shaken, were reinforced.

Dorothy Martin (in the book called Mrs. Marian Keech) and her collaborators Charles and Lillian Laughead (alias Thomas and Daisy Armstrong) believed they channeled messages from extraterrestrials. These cosmic communiqués first predicted landings by flying saucers and later prophesized a great flood that would engulf everyone on December 21. So convinced were they and their followers that on three separate occasions they trekked to the predicted landing sites. In the end, they assembled at Martin’s home to await salvation by the saucers delegated to pick them up before the deluge. Some even quit their jobs and gave away their earthly possessions in anticipation of being whisked skyward.

Festinger (who is well known for his theories of cognitive dissonance) suspected that rather than admit to error these true believers would find a way to rationalize these disconfirmations. Discomfort with inconsistent perceptions would induce them to reconceptualize what occurred so as to produce the appearance of consistency. This, of course, is what transpired. When the original saucer landings did not take place, the leaders and their adherents interpreted these as tests of faith. They were being asked to demonstrate their steadfastness in the face of disappointment. Something similar occurred when the deluge failed to materialize. At this point, Martin announced the reception of a message explaining that the Earth had been spared. Thanks to the group’s dedication, the cataclysm had been cancelled.
Indeed, subsequent to this, Martin and the Armstrongs increased their proselytizing. Far from being discouraged, they continued to believe. More certain than ever, they even sought publicity for their ideas. Unabashed at having been proven wrong, they saw no reason to apologize. So far as they were concerned, they were not mistaken. To the contrary, they were responsible for saving humanity. Moreover, the continued security of the planet depended upon others joining their mission. It was the scoffing unbelievers who were being imprudent.

Half a century later, Diana Tumminia engaged in a more extensive study of a saucer cult. Her account in *When Prophecy Never Fails* demonstrates that the earlier tendencies remain with us. Humanity has not become more sensible during the intervening years. Tumminia found that so-called Unarians were similarly unperturbed by the failure of predicted saucer landings. They too found reasons to explain why these had not occurred. Other uncomfortable events, such as the deaths of their leaders, were similarly incorporated into an elaborate mythology that entailed previous lives on distant planets. Fervent in their conviction that souls are reborn, they construed current events as indicators of previous happenings in earlier incarnations. This allowed them to characterize their analyses as “scientific.” Others might sneer, but this was because they were unenlightened. Members of the group knew better. Commending one another on their own perceptiveness, they were convinced of their insights.

Contemporary liberals are not unlike these Unarians or the Martin circle. They too hold fast to disconfirmed beliefs. They also remain unperturbed when events contradict their predictions. Thus, when a massive stimulus failed to revive a dismal economy, they claimed it had rescued the nation. Or when a massive reform of the medical system did not reduce costs, they pretended it would. Few liberals admit their errors, but neither did the Unarians. True believers do not perceive themselves as mistaken. Nor do they believe themselves irrational. To the contrary, they are convinced they are correct. For them, their commitments are never disconfirmed. Instead, the facts are reinterpreted to corroborate their assertions. It is thus their critics who are mistaken. It is they, for example, the conservatives, who are irrational. Such mean-spirited reactionaries are obviously out of touch with reality.

But what if the liberals are the real Unarians? What if they are blinded by a need for consistency? Few would disagree that religious cults hunger for salvation. Their members generally hope to be saved
from a world perceived as iniquitous—or at minimum disappointing. But don’t liberals seek a similar salvation? Aren’t they too transfixed by the injustices of a world they did not shape? Liberals may not anticipate extraterrestrial saviors, but they do expect to lift the downtrodden out of their misery. They likewise intend to bring peace on earth and fulfillment to the masses. In other words, they too cling to extravagant hopes.

Liberals are also like the Unarians in that they wish to decode a complex and mystifying world. Why, they wonder, do unexpected events so frequently disturb our fondest expectations? Liberals may not share a mythology involving thirty-three planets arranged in the shape of a vortex. Nor do they urge earthlings to build a power tower to unite the spiritual energy of the universe. Nevertheless, they have their own explanatory myths. They, for instance, believe in the ultimate equality of all human beings. For them, our natural parity has been undermined by an unjust economic system. They further believe in a redistribution of wealth to correct these disparities. This is why Obama has frequently recommended taxing the rich. Liberals, of course, do not consider these myths. But what if they are? What if they are simply intellectualized efforts to make sense of unpleasant realities? Wouldn’t liberals be as guilty of simplistic thinking as the Unarians? Some progressives get around this hurdle by claiming there are no truths, only opinions. Nevertheless, they insist their own views are valid.

Another quality shared by liberals and Unarians is that they live their faith. Both put their money where their mouths are. Festinger argued that irrevocable actions often bind people to their beliefs. Once publicly committed to a position, it is difficult to back away without a loss of face. Indeed, reflect on how hard it is to admit a mistake. The words “I was wrong” choke in most of our throats. Many of us prefer to protect an error rather than seem foolish. If we can convince others we are right, their agreement is taken as proof that we were not wrong. This was clearly the case with the Unarians who wrote books to defend their predictions. It was especially true of those who went to the predicted landing sites. There they happily posed for pictures carrying welcome signs. Nor were they embarrassed by newspaper stories of their exploits. If anything, those who publicly identified as Unarian became more devout.

But isn’t this also true of liberals? Those most adamant in their public demonstrations of faith are likewise the least apt to abandon them. Moreover, liberals too vocally proclaim their devotion. Their
political attitudes are not hidden under a bushel basket. Instead they are flaunted at Occupy Wall Street demonstrations; announced on bumper stickers; and made known in a myriad of private conversations. Nor are liberals above proselytizing. If they could, they would convert everyone to their viewpoint. Nonetheless, these efforts begin with public declarations of faith. Liberals are not shy about telling others what to believe. They are ardent witnesses for their version of social justice. They similarly donate to the cause, vote for its candidates, and send letters to legislators pleading for the orthodox programs. Moreover, few change their minds. If we need an example, which of those who marched against the Vietnam War have since decided the conflict was justified? And who among those who supported Obama’s stimulus program have subsequently admitted it did not work?

Finally, liberals, like Unarians, revel in public encouragement. In fact, they receive more of it than mere cultists. Liberalism is one of the two major political outlooks of contemporary Western society. For more than a century it has been in the vanguard setting our social agenda. Even people who do not subscribe to its tenets must respond to its initiatives. In universities, newspaper offices, and welfare institutions it is so dominant that nary a dissenting voice is heard. Indeed, in many such places, it is possible to imagine that liberalism is the only viable perspective. So rarely is opposition expressed that it may be thought nonexistent. On the other hand, affirming the party line draws smiles of approbation. Not only do heads nod in agreement, but voices chime in with reinforcing comments. Liberals tend to create the reverse of Thomas Nast’s responsibility circles. Nast famously depicted members of New York City’s infamous Tweed ring as standing in a circle pointing the finger of blame at an adjacent partner. With liberals, it is pats on the back and nominations for Pulitzer Prizes that make the rounds.

I can personally testify to liberal solidarity. As a sociologist, I am exposed to an incredible thirty-to-one ratio of liberals to conservatives among my colleagues. Sociologists therefore expect unfamiliar sociologists to be comparably liberal. Add to this that I was raised a New York Jew and it is generally assumed that I too must be liberal. As a result, I am regularly treated to candid expressions of liberal opinion. Time and again, I hear jokes about conservative stupidity. Thus, during Ronald Reagan’s presidency, the fact that he majored in sociology was a source of embarrassment. How could one of our own be so dense? Steadfast liberals, in contrast, are regarded as intellectual
paragons. Their views, whatever their accomplishments, are celebrated. At one point I witnessed a respected colleague propose either Oprah Winfrey or Tom Hanks for president. What is more, this suggestion was greeted with warm applause. No one suggested that these might be inappropriate choices. In stark contrast, dismissive comments about Karl Marx draw hostile gazes.

Liberal solidarity is further reinforced by shared reactions to its opponents. Commentators such as Fox News’ Bill O'Reilly help both to define and buttress liberal cohesion. Such evil outsiders provide targets to be attacked and opinions to be contradicted. Thus, when O'Reilly harangues against “secular humanists,” liberals cheerfully accept this mantle. Or when he takes up the cudgels against those in favor of saying “Happy Holidays” at Christmas, they insist on using the phrase. They are not like O'Reilly. He is the “other,” whereas they are enlightened insiders. It does not even bother them that O'Reilly is more of a populist than conservative. That he obviously disagrees with liberal opinions is sufficient to draw their ire.

Nor are liberals averse to attacking nonliberals. They trust that their friends can be mobilized by provoking fights with common enemies. If one’s cause is seen as endangered, the faithful will rally to its defense. This is why O'Reilly is so hated. Were he less popular, he could be ignored, whereas his success is perceived as a red flag. Clearly, O'Reilly must be stopped before he corrupts the inadequately committed. The Mormons suffered a similar fate when they backed a California proposition asserting that marriage must be between a man and a woman. Since their money was seen as tipping the balance against gay marriage, they became anathema. Almost immediately the pickets went up against their institutions and those who made donations to the church lost their jobs. In fact, attacking these bad guys became a recruiting tool. Making them more visible helped energize those sitting on the fence. It crystallized their faith so as to make it more difficult to renounce.

Putting the pieces together, liberal orthodoxy fits the Festinger criteria for heightening commitment. Just as with the Unarians, observable declarations of faith result in irrevocable actions that reinforce the faith. Consequently, when events discredited their beliefs, they continued to champion failed prophesies. This was especially evident after Obama’s minions were repudiated in a midterm election. Instead of admitting that they had not ended an inherited economic recession, they boasted of having created or saved millions of jobs. And rather
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than acknowledge that ObamaCare would cost trillions of dollars, they insisted it saved trillions. They even refused to cut the budget deficit on the grounds that Republicans were mean-spirited alarmists. So far as they were concerned, their own policies were correct no matter what the evidence showed. Thus, while a Greece might go bankrupt, the United States never would no matter how much the government spent.

Enthusiasms and Simplifications

Liberals often argue that they must be correct because their opponents are so wrong. Moreover, their own view of history has to prevail because conservatives cannot be allowed to win. This latter alternative would be unthinkable. Partisans of social justice must therefore rally to its defense rather than allow the forces of reaction to succeed. Too much progress has been made to permit a new dark age to descend upon humanity. Liberalism is not a false prophesy! Nor are its adherents wild-eyed crazies awaiting the arrival of flying saucers.

So what is the truth? Is liberalism dying? Is it fatally flawed? Or are those who doubt its tenets afflicted by their own delusions? One thing is certain: liberalism remains vigorous. Its adherents are louder and more aggressive than ever. Merely going on the Internet to read contributions to Moveon.org or the fulminations on the Daily Kos confirms this. These blogs, and hundreds of others, are dedicated to promoting the cause. Widely read, and boasting legions of contributors, they bespeak a sizeable community of activists. Indicative of the same phenomenon were the huge number of donors to the Obama campaign. So is the zeal of the enthusiastic crowds that show up for his rallies. The gleam in their eyes demonstrates a profound commitment. These people care. Indeed, many are convinced a new millennium is about to arrive.

Sadly for the liberal cause, this vigor itself suggests trouble. When people become wild in their adoration, there is a good chance they are feeding on their own hopes. Emotional frenzies often camouflage underlying reservations. As has often been said, that which seems too good to be true generally is. Successful con men understand that the most vulnerable marks are subverted by their own desires. People who too passionately want to get rich are likely to believe promises of effortless wealth. Similarly, those desirous of political salvation are more likely to be taken in by promises of government-based salvation. Assuming this is so, the very enthusiasm of the Obama crowds is
evidence of inflated aspirations. Who but the overly enthusiastic would believe that the government could spend additional trillions of dollars, lower taxes for 95 percent of Americans, and still reduce the national debt? Who could believe that a Democratic administration would eliminate wasteful government spending when none has previously? Such naivété is not a sign of political health, but desperation.

Nor is the vitriol of contemporary liberals an indicator of confidence. Partisans addicted to calling their opponents fascists have gone over the top. By the same token, when they make movies depicting the assassination of a president they despise or paint pictures of postage stamps with a gun pointed toward his head, they have abandoned the pretense of civility. Correspondingly, when they steal college newspapers that disagree with their positions on affirmative action or shout down opposing speakers, they emulate the fanaticism of movements they presumably loath. In these cases, they have morphed into an American version of the Storm Troopers. Though they deny this, if they knew more about German history, the parallels would be undeniable. Much as George Santayana once warned, those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

There is, of course, a huge difference between liberals and Nazis. Contemporary liberals are not as violent as Hitler’s supporters. Nor do they sponsor final solutions. Their violence is largely rhetorical, although many of their protests are physically destructive. While they revel in intimidating their foes, their promises of bloodshed are primarily for effect. Still, they are anything but gracious. For the most part, they refuse to sit down to reason with their opponents. They prefer “non-negotiable demands” instead. Also different is that the Nazi marchers prevailed. They not only got their man appointed chancellor, they imposed the Third Reich. Their totalitarianism was thus actual. Although liberals are not nearly as despotic, they are as ambitious. They too intend to remake society. The difference is that they are unlikely to succeed. The United States is not Germany and the current economic downturn is not the Great Depression. American voters are therefore less likely to tolerate cosmic changes. They desire improvements, not radical remedies. The extremism of contemporary liberals has therefore provoked opposition. It has unleashed passions that are apt to be its undoing.

Here then is another paradox. If the underlying insecurities of today’s liberalism precipitated vociferous demands for change, while the implementation of these has generated a backlash, why have their
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programs been so widely embraced? Why have so many good people—people who genuinely want to improve the human condition—flocked to its banner? And why have so many moderates—people not blinded by liberal enthusiasms—opted for a president who promised dramatic change? The answer has to do with the nature of political persuasion. Politicians are prey to simplifications. Those who wish to be elected understand that they cannot afford to be subtle. If they hope to assemble large coalitions of supporters, they cannot be byzantine. Complexities are confusing and uninspiring. Crowds do not—and will not—gather to hear academic disquisitions on economic theory. They prefer red meat. They want to be aroused by glowing promises of a better life.

Consider Obama’s primary appeal. He told the American people he represented “[c]hange—you can believe in.” His administration would profoundly alter the status quo. He did not, however, say what form this change would take. Nor did he reveal how he would produce it. He did not even explain why this transformation would be for the better. Nevertheless, none of this mattered. The Republicans countered with the claim that change was not necessarily an improvement, that it could make things worse. Yet this ignited no fires. The voters instead yawned. They wanted change, not verbal niceties. And so the cheers persisted because Obama’s audiences could read into his pledge whatever they chose. The poor could imagine their bills being paid by the government, while the wealthy anticipated the return of prosperity. Homosexuals could foresee the legalization of gay marriage, while straights envisaged an end to the Iraq War. Unspecified change is, in essence, a Santa Claus sack full of unopened presents. It is a blank slate upon which people project their fondest desires. This allows those with different expectations to subscribe to what seems the same agenda.

As much as anything, voters were swayed by Obama’s preternatural self-confidence. His tone of voice and imperturbable style suggested that he could be trusted. Moreover, his obvious intelligence indicated that he would deliver workable solutions. There was no need to quibble about the specifics. The man’s character spoke for itself. In addition, his mixed race allowed voters to congratulate themselves on their tolerance. Alongside this, questions regarding whether particular programs were feasible paled to insignificance. Discussions of technical qualifications seemed trivial in comparison. They made those who offered them sound uncertain. Better to leave the details to someone you trusted rather than get mired in the weeds.
Putting liberal enthusiasms and campaign simplifications together, we come up with a reason to doubt the validity of liberal assertions. Liberals, and suggestible moderates, might have been impressed with vociferous claims and ambiguous promises, but these did not add up to much. They certainly did not prove that liberalism is free of fallacious prophecies. Then again, they did not establish it is riven with them either. Demonstrating the latter requires evidence. So far, all we have deduced is a set of questions. Nor have we suggested a viable alternative. Even if liberalism is dying, this does not demonstrate that conservatism is poised to inherit its mantle. It too may be rent by contradictions.

Why Liberalism Cannot Work—An Overview

Liberalism is about dreams. It pretends to be about the future, but actually peddles fantasies of salvation. Liberals claim to be hardheaded realists who have harnessed science to improving the human condition, whereas they are more like small children listening for the hooves of Santa’s reindeer on the roof. There is an old adage that has been attributed to everyone from Benjamin Disraeli to Winston Churchill which goes as follows: “If you are not a socialist when you are twenty, you do not have a heart. But if you are still a socialist at forty, you do not have a head.” This observation is severe, but it contains more than a grain of truth. So does the claim that people tend to become more conservative as they grow older. It is therefore the very young who are most moved by liberal sentiments. It is they who find its promises most attractive. This is why Obama’s campaign pinned its hopes on mobilizing their enthusiasm. It is also why advertisers aim to persuade the young rather than the affluent elderly.

To be blunt, liberalism is not merely about dreams, but immature dreams. Its greatest attraction is for those who do not understand how the world works and/or who do not possess the strength to control their own destinies. In appealing to their sense of social concern, the young are persuaded that compassion is sufficient to reform the world. If they care enough about the poor and downtrodden, this will, of itself, generate the power to change history. The old and the wealthy cannot, and will not, do the job because they are bitter and selfish. As the hippies once warned, we should not (with a few exceptions such as Obama) trust those over thirty. They failed to build a new world because they were inadequately educated and corrupted by power. Hence, as Obama asserted, old folks such as John McCain just “don’t
get it.” They are out of touch. It takes fresh eyes and pure hearts to clean out the Augean stables of a society in shambles.

So what is the Liberal Dream? By now its outlines should be familiar. At least as widely disseminated as Christian ideals, its tenets are deeply ensconced in our political platitudes, educational objectives, and public entertainments. Liberalism begins by extolling universal love. Instead of competing with one another, people are urged to be collaborative. They are asked to be mutually supportive on the assumption that widespread cooperation is in everyone’s interest. If people care enough about one another, they will be mutually helpful. This is what socialism is about. Its central goal is putting the good of the community above personal desires. As social creatures, we human beings must understand that our individual destinies are tied to our joint welfare. Furthermore, the well-being of the whole can only be ensured by what used to be called “brotherhood.” As Obama clearly affirmed, we must ultimately be each other’s keepers. One might even assert that it is in our interest to become one large and loving village.

Next liberalism asserts that the government must mediate this collective love. As the sole agent of all the people, its power must be dedicated to furthering the interests of all. It has to set up, and enforce, rules that guarantee mutual respect. In the process, it needs to develop massive programs that do for individuals what they are unable to do for themselves. In the final analysis, it is up to the government to protect people from themselves and their neighbors. In the modern context, this translates into establishing a welfare state. The government needs to create a safety net that does not allow people to be injured. Their bodily wants, health, and even emotional well-being must all be safeguarded. To do less is callous. It would demonstrate a lack of compassion.

But we need not fear a mammoth government becoming oppressive. Liberals perceive themselves as social democrats. The government they sponsor will protect people because it is made up of the people; in other words, it will be “a government of the people, by the people and for the people.” Moreover, those running it will be among the best and brightest because, themselves liberals, their compassion and competence will dictate that they pursue shared objectives. And because the government will employ the best minds and the most effective organizers, they will do a better job of helping people than they could do for themselves. A veritable “brain trust” will certify that
only rational policies are implemented in a compassionate manner. What amounts to a kindhearted collection of village elders will see to this. They might even be described as philosopher kings, albeit without crowns or a divine mandate.

The result of all this intelligent concern is that there will be no wars, no discrimination, no pollution, no disease, no ignorance, and no poverty. All of these are irrational and will therefore be banished. Since capitalism breeds these horrors, it must be consigned to the ash heap of history. Instead an elemental Marxism will become the order of the day. Each person must be asked to contribute to society according to his or her abilities, while receiving according to his or her needs. Selfishness, being illogical, must be dispensed with. Since no one will be in want; no one will be in fear. Everyone will be cared for and thus will feel secure.

As an additional consequence of this effective, egalitarian concern, everyone will be equal. No one will lord it above anyone else because everyone will recognize that no one is better than anyone else. With social resources intelligently distributed, no one will possess an excess of goods; hence no one will use these to gain superiority. But with no superiority, there can be no inferiority. Relationships based on a disparity of power will thus disappear. Indeed, the whole notion of power becomes obsolete. As a result, no one will ever again have to worry about being forced to serve the whims of others. As their own masters, they will be on a par with every other individual.

In order to achieve this, special attention will be paid to the weak. These underdogs need to be lifted out of inferiority. They will thus not be allowed to suffer in silence as they do in capitalism. Social leaders must recognize their special responsibility to the oppressed and make them the focus of their efforts to achieve equality. Thanks to liberalism bullying will not be permitted. No longer will it be allowable to blame the victims for their misery.

Furthermore, with complete equality will come universal liberty. As potential oppressors are cut down to size, individuals will be able to realize their potentials. They will be able to engage in self-actualization so as to achieve their best selves. No longer obliged to defend themselves against the demands of selfish elites, their energies will be freed to undertake personal growth. Whether their private bent leads them to the arts, the sciences, or athletics, they can become as good as is possible without fear over-shadowing others. In this way, the whole of humanity will be elevated to a level never previously achieved.
Finally, liberalism promotes niceness. One of its central tenets is that goodness begets goodness. In a society in which people care for one another, their concern must elicit concern from others. Goodness is, as it were, contagious. Genuine morality, of its very nature, is communicable. People who are not attacked, but rather befriended, are not destructively defensive. They allow their naturally helpful inclinations to emerge. In the end, an absence of coercion is self-sustaining. Gentleness and courtesy become the norm, with people, if not joining hands to sing Cumbaya, at least joining hearts in a global family based on universal amiability. The bad old day of jealousy and greed will thereby be banished.

How could anyone object to this? Is there any part of this agenda a decent human being would find unworthy? To suggest there is seems peevish. It contradicts a multitude of universal human aspirations. Many decent people are, in fact, drawn to the Liberal Dream. The young and dispossessed, in particular, find it congenial. So do secular moralists. In emphasizing compassion and universal equality, it makes them feel morally superior. Conversely, to bridle at the Liberal Dream is to label oneself a curmudgeon. Being against niceness and equality sounds absurd. Likewise, rejecting personal growth or interpersonal concern appears malevolent. Worse still, defending oppression is insane. As a consequence, few do. Certainly not most enlightened Americans. They know better.

So why object to liberalism? And why claim that it is dying? Isn’t this equivalent to predicting a bleak future for humanity?

Well, no it is not. It is, in fact, to do the opposite. The primary reason for rejecting liberalism is that it is dishonest and unrealistic. As described above, it has never existed and never will. Fundamentally inconsistent with human nature, it cannot be actualized. Total liberalism has never been implemented, not because a clique of selfish elitists has stood in the way, but because the facts of human existence make it impossible. It is, and forever will remain, a dream that exists solely in the imagination. Fraught with hypocrisies, it is dead on arrival. People may find comfort in its promises, but they will never experience its benefits. Sadly, liberalism specializes in hope, not its realization.

This becomes clear when we examine how liberalism has been operationalized. The specific programs and regulations it has inspired have hardly ever lived up to their billing. Most are typically launched with wildly exaggerated claims, struggle through a period of disappointing accomplishment, and then limp off-stage, only to be replaced
by equally exaggerated promises. Like the War on Poverty, they are introduced with a flourish of trumpets only to disappear from the public agenda several years later without so much as an admission of failure. Sadly, this has not happened only once. Rather, it is standard operating procedure for liberal causes. In the abstract they seem optimistic, whereas in the flesh they fail to deliver.

One of the central areas in which liberalism has sought reform is economic justice. The goal has been to create a prosperity so dynamic that everyone partakes of it. Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) expressed this aspiration by promising “freedom from want.” He would end the Great Depression by confiscating the ill-gotten gains of the rich and channeling them to the less well-off. The trouble is that his policies did not end the depression, nor lift the poor out of it. Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) later expressed this same aspiration by promising to eliminate poverty. He asserted that a nation as affluent as the United States should be ashamed to tolerate destitution in its midst. The poor must immediately be empowered to enter the middle class. Only they weren’t. An alphabet soup of government agencies could not put the Humpty Dumpty of individual privation together. Millions of people remained stubbornly below the poverty line. Then Jimmy Carter told us that welfare was “a disgrace to the human race” and he would end it. But he did not. The dependency fostered by government handouts was not reduced until a Republican Congress forced reform on a reluctant Democratic president.

Related to economic justice is the distribution of such fundamental goods as education and health. Liberals believe these should be universally accessible. They want the government to provide them from cradle to grave. Described as rights, it is assumed that the quality of these services will thereby be improved. No longer will the underprivileged have to line up at hospital emergency rooms. No longer will the children of the poor have to accept menial jobs from want of a college education. Whether a government-supplied education can be superior is, of course, another matter. The same can be said of health care. Can government-organized clinics supply the quality of care available in the marketplace? Considering the experience of other nations, the answer is uncertain.

Another aspect of liberal reform is social justice. Not only must economic disparities be evened out, so must social inequalities. Basic to this objective has been family reform. Back in the 1920s the goal was “free love.” The paternalistic family was to be dismantled so as to
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liberate men and women from its oppressive obligations. Bertrand Russell actually suggested that the government support children so that husbands and wives need not be enslaved. More recently the call has been for the multicultural family. This is essentially a recommendation that families be constructed anyway people desire, whether this entails gay couples or single-parent households. There has also been a loosening of marriage vows to make divorce more acceptable. Even swinging marriages are held to be unobjectionable. Everyone must be allowed to handle relationships as they choose. Yet have these innovations improved the life circumstances of those affected? This is doubtful. The family is an ancient institution not likely to be disassembled so lightly.

Social justice has also focused on eliminating disparities between social categories. No group is supposed to exercise more power than any other. Gender, race, religion, ethnicity, and sexual orientation are all supposed to make no difference in determining social status. With respect to gender, the goal is androgyny. Any discrepancies between men and women are held to result from disparities in socialization. Thus many liberals assert that if the manner in which boys and girls are raised is comparable, divisive differences will evaporate and the traditional male hegemony will be consigned to the history books. With respect to race, the goal was once integration. Now it is equal representation in every aspect of society. With respect to sexual orientation, the aim was formerly toleration. Currently it is equal rights in areas such as marriage and adoption. With respect to religion, the target was also once toleration. Nowadays a separation of state and religion is interpreted as ejecting religion from the public scene. Fundamentalist beliefs are condemned as inherently oppressive.

Nor has it been considered sufficient to encourage the elimination of social differences. These are to be radically expunged through legal and programmatic means. Political correctness is no longer a matter of informal social sanctions. It has been transformed into laws about such things as hate crimes. Even more widespread has been the use of affirmative action to redistribute people according to their proportion in the population. In school, on the job, and in government, representation is dictated not by ability or desire, but social category. Education too has been mobilized to teach the proper attitudes. Even the very young are instructed that it is perfectly fine that Sally has two mothers. And as for recalcitrant adults, sensitivity training is the
order of the day. If they do not learn to express the correct opinions, they may find their positions in jeopardy.

Then too there is the issue of defending the downtrodden. Criminals are asserted to have unalienable rights, as do the mentally ill and drug abusers. Parents who use corporal punishment to discipline their children are now condemned as abusive, whereas murders are scrupulously protected from overzealous law enforcement agents. Even living out on the street is protected. Where once the homeless were described as vagrants and jailed, they are now objects of compassion. All of these outcasts, save for wayward parents, are understood to be victims. If they have offended the rules, either the rules are barbaric or social pressures to honor them are extreme. In the first case, the rules need to be loosened, and in the second, ordinary people must be more tolerant. In other words, niceness must be applied to rule breakers, not just rule keepers. The root causes of their deviance have to be understood so that these can be eliminated. Punishment is therefore the problem, not those punished.

As with economic justice, however, there is a question about whether these measures have the intended effect. Has feminism actually improved the situation of women? Or has it protected the interests of young children? And what about rehabilitating criminals? Has treating them with kindness reduced levels of criminality? As for affirmative action, has it elevated the status of blacks and women? There is reason to believe not. Education too may have achieved less than what was promised. All in all, these various social justice projects have had mixed results. Just how mixed must await further examination. In the meantime, it should be noted that passionate proclamations of liberal success ought to arouse skepticism.

As if this were not enough, liberalism promises environmental justice. It blames capitalism for polluting our environment and assures us that a more equitable society will be less contaminated. Once market-oriented greed is tamed, the cleanup will begin in earnest. Global warming will come under control, as both air and water are returned to a pristine condition. Ours will also become a less energy prolific world as people learn to reign in their appetites and respect the ecology. No longer will urban sprawl be allowed to desecrate the forests or oil wells defile the landscape. Automobile traffic too will be reduced as people congregate in central cities and rely on mass transportation. Eventually the skies will clear and people will once again see the stars.
There is no doubt that the environment has improved in recent years. Nor is there any doubt that pure air and water can foster an increased life span. What is not as certain is whether liberal measures will have the advertised effects. Ironically, efforts to reduce global warming may have little effect either because the problem is not of human origin or because draconian actions cannot succeed. And what about the possibility that reduced energy production will result in impoverishment? Many liberal activists say they do not care, that what matters is saving the planet. Some even urge that the earth’s population be reduced by a factor of seven. They tell us that the carrying capacity of the planet is about a billion people. But then they do not say who should volunteer for elimination.

Lastly liberals seek moral justice. They want a world characterized by civility and mutual respect. People are asked be one another’s keepers, but not each other’s police officers. In fact, morality is said to be relative. Because what is right for one person may not be for another, everyone must decide for him or herself what is correct. As a consequence, moral tolerance needs to be universal, with guilt trips held to a minimum. People must not be told that they are at fault for the persons they are. Religious authorities must understand, for example, that they are not authorities for everyone. Their fire and brimstone nonsense must accordingly be identified for what it is. A civilized society cannot permit inquisitions or witch hunts. The trouble is that in practice tolerance tends to be confined to liberals’ ranks. Dissenters are not so fortunate. Whereas free speech is said to apply to everyone, nonliberal voices, such as the Tea Party members, are shouted down. They are accused of undermining the coming millennium and are thus exempt from protection. Nor is relativism quite as relative as liberals pretend. It does not apply to attitudes with which they disagree. Female circumcision, for instance, is condemned as “genital mutilation.” It is not accorded respect on the grounds that other cultures approve of it.

In general, liberals believe their programs can come to fruition only if several conditions are achieved. They begin by denouncing property rights. The Bible tells us that the love of money is the root of evil, whereas liberals believe property ownership is more insidious. They argue that if everything is owned in common, interpersonal envy can be eliminated. Moreover, with everyone allowed equal access to goods and services, no one will be in want. People can take what they require, as required. Likewise no one will be able to manipulate others by rewarding them with a paycheck, nor buy their way out of trouble.
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with a bribe. Lobbying legislators with goodies will be a thing of the past and even marrying for money will lose its significance. Instead, generosity will be of the spirit, not the wallet.

Liberals also believe it necessary to eliminate hierarchical distinctions. They remind us that people are people, with no one inherently better than anyone else. Most would approve of Thomas Jefferson’s observation that no human being is born with a saddle on his back or spurs on her heels. These accoutrements are acquired later on. If people learn to look to each other’s humanity, not their status, status will prove an artificial anachronism. People will then treat each other according to their desserts, not their symbolic accomplishments. When this occurs, tyranny will become impossible. Nor, with genuine equality the norm, will anyone be ashamed of his/her origins.

Many liberals would also like to eliminate risk. They believe that as long as things can go wrong, some people will be unhappy. They do not merely want to furnish a social safety net; they intend to wrap everyone in cotton batting. Thus, universal health care is supposed to keep everyone healthy, while job security keeps people employed. Furthermore, multicultural families will afford everyone love on their own terms. Most liberals, however, are not enamored of entrepreneurs. They distrust innovations that upset comfortable apple carts. They do not want changes to eject anyone onto the proverbial street. Life is supposed to be predictable and its dangers held to a minimum. In short, everyone is supposed to wear a bicycle helmet and every ladder must carry a warning that it is unsafe to perch on the top step.

Once more most of this sounds reasonable—until one examines the details. It turns out that a majority of the liberal programs have not worked very well. Nonetheless, there is a more serious objection. The problem is that most can never work. They depend upon conditions that cannot be achieved. For starters, property rights will never be eliminated. Human beings are property-owning creatures. We all wish to exercise control over some physical goods. Whether these are toothbrushes or forty acres of land, we are prepared to defend them. Moreover, we are prepared to defend the property rights of others. Even parents scold a child who takes a cookie from a weaker sibling. To imagine a world in which this is not so is to imagine a world in chaos. But not to worry. Such a state has never existed. Nor will it ever exist—not even if everyone becomes liberal. Even liberals like to accumulate pretty toys. They are not about to give up their Gucci loafers or morning cups of Starbucks coffee.
Nor will hierarchical distinctions disappear. We human beings are given to ranking one another according to relative power. No one wants to be at the bottom of the greasy pole. None of us wants to be less important than others. Some years ago a Broadway song asked If I ruled the world. In so doing, it appealed to a widespread fantasy of being so powerful as to be able to do anything one desires. By the same token, no wants to be a slave. None of us wishes to be so powerless as to always defer to others. Liberals suggest this is why people need to be equal, but this ignores our persistent desire to gain an advantage over others. Such a craving for superiority amounts to nothing less than a yearning to be special. And who does not want to be special? Yet in a world where everyone is special, no one is. It is one where none stand out. In such a world not only would no one be rich, but no one would be a rock star. Such a universe would embrace mediocrity. As a consequence, it is a place where few would want to live. In the real world, we compete for priority. We always have and always will. To imagine otherwise is to believe in fairytales.

Nor are we liable to eliminate all risks. People will continue to die no matter how advanced medicine becomes. People will also stumble in achieving their fondest hopes. Disappointment is a part of human existence. Not only is this so, but we make certain that it is. Thus, we ski down mountains for the thrill of it. We also set goals too ambitious to be reached. Moreover, the moment we get what we desire, we aim higher, thereby ensuring that at some point we fall short. Nor can we eliminate the accidents of living. Since no one can foresee, or control, all contingencies, bad things are sure to occur. We may trip over a child’s skate in our driveway or invest in a new product that is overtaken by a better one. Who knows, perhaps some day an asteroid will do to us what one did to the dinosaurs.

The Liberal Dream in Its Impossible Particulars

If these observations are not sufficient to undercut the liberal agenda, then it is time to be more specific about the inconsistencies of the Liberal Dream. Liberals seek justice, but in many cases they pursue what Thomas Sowell has labeled cosmic justice. He argues that liberals want things to be so perfect that they guarantee they never will be as good as they predict. Liberals essentially convert the perfect into the enemy of the good. To illustrate, in desiring everyone to be rich, they ensure that people will not be as affluent as is possible. Thus, by advocating a radical redistribution of wealth, they weaken the motives
that create wealth. As we have already seen, attempts to eliminate poverty have not succeeded. But the difficulty lies deeper than this. Governments do not create wealth. They are not engines of production. Indeed, they are often elaborate Ponzi schemes. They take from some people to give to others, that is, until they have exhausted the resources of those from whom they take. Nor can governments ensure that everyone works up to his or her ability. Some people inevitably drop out. Some rebel. Some are lazy. What then? Under such conditions can they be brought up to the level of the more ambitious?

Similarly, can there be complete justice with respect to education or health? It has been argued that educational fairness exists only if there is a total equality of academic results. Only if no child is left behind can it be said that every child has been provided with equivalent opportunities. The trouble with this requirement is that not every child is equally talented. Hence, if all are to obtain good grades, these must be watered down. Some people, of course, find this perfectly acceptable. They regard grades as invidious distinctions that impose unnecessary disparities. They prefer accepting children for whom they are, in which case ignorance will become the norm. Likewise, health care is said to be fair only if everyone is afforded the best of every appropriate intervention. No matter that the cost would be greater than the gross national product. No matter that some patients do not take prescribed medicines. Somehow everybody must be saved from every potential malady.

Then there are the promises of social justice. When these too become cosmic, they are likewise impossible to achieve. Thus, when status differences are totally eliminated, the injustices begin to pile up. Sadly, it is because of the presumptions of social justice that the family has been condemned. It is accused of depriving men and women of the freedom to be themselves. It is also said to be inimical to true love. In reality, however, destroying the underpinnings of interpersonal commitment annihilates the opportunity for love. Human beings who flit from flower to flower, as advised by the king in *The King and I*, do not accumulate much honey. They are more apt to die lonely and disillusioned. Similarly, children deprived of dependable parental care suffer the fate of many foster children. They do not grow into a confident, satisfied maturity, but anxious, self-sabotaging adults. Deprived of two committed parents, they remain emotionally deprived.

By the same token, eliminating the distinctions between men and women is not a prescription for universal happiness. Men and women
are different. This verity is no longer politically correct, but it remains a fact. The former president of Harvard University may have lost his job for affirming this truth, but it is still the truth. It is also true that honoring these differences makes successful intimate relationships more likely. It is equally true that people are more prone to enjoying their work if it is in line with their preferences and abilities. Artificial quotas are exactly that—artificial.

Race and sexual orientation are, however, another matter. Liberals are absolutely correct in insisting that these categories should have nothing to do with a person’s opportunities. The error here is in assuming that color and sexual fairness can be legally mandated. Reforming social rules can rectify some wrongs, as witness the 1960s Civil Rights legislation, but these changes can only go so far. They are able to influence our cultural evolution, but not impose it. Correcting subtle attitudes depends on the evolution of larger social trends.

As for crime and drug abuse, social justice is not a matter of crippling the legal system. No doubt there have been abuses in applying the law, but once more liberalism has gone too far. Cavalier pronouncements about how it is better to allow a hundred guilty men go free than to imprison one innocent person are incredibly shortsighted. A hundred guilty men circulating through the community are apt to inflict substantial damage. So great would their depredations be that a society exposed to them might as well not have a legal system. As a result, by converting excuse abuse into a cottage industry, liberals have done ordinary citizens no favor. Making it more difficult to convict criminals simply creates more criminals. As per the Broken Window Theory, it sends the message that society does not care about enforcing its rules. Unfortunately, those most injured are the innocent bystanders.

When it comes to environmental justice, the problem is a little different. Here the issue is how much is too much. If cosmic justice entails demolishing the economy, this is over the line. Almost no one is against protecting the environment. After all it was Republicans under Teddy Roosevelt who initiated the conservation movement. This being so, our current disagreements are essentially over how radically to alter our consumption and production habits. Recycling plastic bottles is not too much to ask. Nor is encouraging efficient internal combustion engines. But strangling domestic oil production or making the construction of nuclear reactors impossible is another matter. In this case, there are no absolutes. How best to balance prosperity and environmental concerns is thus an open question.
Next, with respect to moral justice, liberalism is in a bind. Liberals tend to be extreme moralists, but moralists who simultaneously deny the validity of morality. They emphatically believe that some things are wrong; nevertheless, they insist that right and wrong are in the eye of the beholder. Were this so, however, were ethical relativism correct, disinterested observers must wonder why they should subscribe to liberal values. Postmodernists tell us that morality is a matter of persuasion, but if this is the case, why should liberals rather than conservatives be persuasive? The absolutism of traditionalists may be in error, but denying the authority of moral rules, qua moral rules, is no improvement. Nor is attacking religion with mindless abandon. While it is true religious authorities have been responsible for some of the worst atrocities in human history, so have the zealous advocates of atheism. The Soviets under Stalin did a more than adequate job of ignoring human dignity. No, what liberalism is lacking is an accurate understanding of how morality operates. In its haste to do what is right, it has forgotten to scrutinize how we arrive at decisions regarding what is right.

Which brings us back to our initial depiction of the Liberal Dream. We opened up by observing that liberalism believes in universal love. The problem with this is that love cannot be universal. Love has to do with attachments to particular human beings. To pretend that these can be with everyone is absurd. While people can abstractly care for the welfare of strangers, they concretely care for the welfare of only a relative few. People play favorites. They always have and always will. Those who claim otherwise have usually been exposed as frauds. They may say they love everyone, but in reality love no one. Much as was the case with the leaders of the French Revolution, they readily commit murder in the name of protecting humanity.

Liberalism then moves on to ask the government to deliver the impossible. The state is supposed to be the guardian of comprehensive public welfare. Its programs and regulations are expected to institute cosmic justice of every sort. Yet there are limitations. Over the past century governments have indeed produced wonders. Thus, they have given us social security, public education, and a splendid infrastructure of roads and bridges. But they have not given us everything they promised. Time and again cranky bureaucracies have mismanaged its programs. Their administrators tell us they care, and then get bogged down in red tape. They may even be unfair, with those having the right political connections (such as unions or banks) obtaining the best
service—including subsidies. Nor have government regulations proved adequate. Hate crime legislation, for instance, has not eliminated hate. What liberals forget is that governments are human institutions. They are run by people, some of whom are invariably imperfect.

Liberals hope to get around this by sponsoring democratic institutions administered by “the best and brightest.” Confident in their own abilities and intentions, they project these onto government agencies. At the very least, they expect to institute policies that guarantee the best results. Unfortunately, they have a difficult time admitting when their calculations are off base. Examples of this tendency are manifold. Accordingly, once upon a time, liberals said that Medicare would be cheap; it wasn’t. They also assured us that rent control would make housing affordable; it didn’t. Nor are liberals willing to acknowledge that they too can be corrupted. As per Lord Acton’s warning, no government anywhere has escaped corruption when given a monopoly of power. Liberals understand that commercial monopolies often fail to operate in the public interest; nonetheless they refuse to recognize that public monopolies can be as obtuse. Witness the Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac debacles. Their managers, public appointees all, placed their personal interests above the welfare of the nation thereby triggering a financial crisis of epic proportions. Arrogance is not confined to business people; it also afflicts the nonprofit sectors.

A comparable arrogance has prompted liberals to promise an end to wars, discrimination, pollution, disease, ignorance, and poverty. These are large orders, none of which have come close to fruition. While there have been advances, these have always been outrun by escalating aspirations. Robert Browning told us “a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?” but liberals want heaven here on earth—which is quite a reach. In particular, getting rid of capitalism, because it entails selfishness, is problematic. What sense does it make to dismantle a system that has given us unprecedented wealth and democracy in favor of an untested form of social organization? This is especially so when efforts to establish collectivist societies, as in the Soviet Union and China, have so uniformly disappointed.

Perhaps the most nonsensical element in the Liberal Dream is its call for total equality. Even Thomas Jefferson recognized this is impossible. He realized that there are always differences in ability, effort, opportunity, results, and just plain luck. In the Declaration of Independence he wrote that all men are created equal, but only with respect to their rights. According to him, everyone is entitled to life,
liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In his original draft Jefferson also included property. He believed in a market economy that defended individual ownership from government expropriation. He likewise believed in an aristocracy of merit. People were to be allowed to rise as high as they were able. To forbid this would enshrine an empire of mediocrity. It would, as many liberals have advocated, prohibit keeping score in little league baseball games on the grounds that this harms the self-esteem of the players. Nevertheless, if human beings are hierarchical animals, we will always keep score, if only in our heads. Children, in fact, do. What is more, some of us will always aspire to be better than the next guy. Happily, in doing so they will produce results that are beneficial to the entire community.

Also nonsensical is the belief that liberalism will free people to be their optimum selves. Aside from the fact that unfettered liberalism is unlikely to prevent oppression, total equality is not the best seedbed for personal growth. People need an incentive to do better. Ironically, competition, in an environment of freedom, is such a spur. People who are given whatever they want grow lethargic. Utterly dependent on others, they are bereft of ambition. Some liberals go on to advocate self-actualization. They believe that everyone possesses an inner self pressing for expression. As a result, they believe personal growth is automatic. What they do not realize is that who we become is a combination of inborn attributes and outside forces. Nature and nurture both make us what we are; hence the nurture part too needs to urge us forward. Market-based rivalries provide this encouragement.

Finally, niceness does not always beget niceness. Years ago, when I worked at a methadone clinic, I witnessed one of our clients cut open the cheek of another with a razor blade because the latter had said a kind word to a third person. Some people are evil. They may not have been born that way, but it is what they have become. To treat them with unalloyed kindness is therefore to invite attack. These people must be stopped. They need to be controlled with a force adequate to do the job. In a world where ravening wolves are allowed to wander as they please, the sheep enjoy short life spans. Nice people, who want to live in a nice world, must possess a harder edge. Daniel might have survived in the lion’s den, but in our world it is wiser to follow Teddy Roosevelt’s advice to carry a big stick.

All of this adds up to the conclusion that liberalism cannot work. Its ambitions rarely get beyond the dream stage. Amazingly, many liberals already know this. Given their sincerity and intelligence, they
cannot help but notice the failures of their beliefs. As successful men and women, most conduct their personal lives in a manner at odds with their political convictions. They, for instance, demand achievement, not mediocrity, of their children. As a result, they are troubled by a cognitive dissonance of the sort Festinger predicted. Just as with the flying saucer cult, the pieces of their lives clash with the effect of increasing their discomfort. This is why so many liberals have become agitated. It is why their denials of collapse have become so emphatic and their promises of improvement so extreme. Contemporary liberals are in a state of panic. They are flapping their wings as fast as they can in the hopes of warding off a mental implosion. With their dreams dying before their eyes, they dread a future they do not understand.

Perhaps the biggest problem liberals face is that they cannot perceive an alternative to their vision. Nor will they go over to the enemy side. They refuse to accept what they interpret as the superstitiousness of conservatism. They also reject the notion that things cannot get better. As good people, they are committed to improvements. Fortunately, they do not have to succumb to impotent pessimism. Even as we speak, events are providing an answer to their conundrum. There is an alternative to the Liberal Dream. The problem is that it is not yet on their radar screens.

Post-Liberalism—The Professionalized Alternative

So what comes after liberalism? What will work, if liberalism cannot? This is a complex question. Indeed, it is one that requires a multipart answer. It turns out that what is possible within an intricate, techno-commercial society is contingent upon how societies are held together. As it happens, not all binding-mechanisms are equally suited to every sort of society. The measures upon which liberals pin their hopes are, in fact, more appropriate to smaller, simpler communities. Despite all their talk about being progressive, their dreams are geared to a world that disappeared millennia ago. Their aspirations are more suitable for the small hunter-gatherer bands of our remote ancestors than the massive, middle-class society we inhabit.

The central issue determining what works to maintain social cohesion is a concept with which sociologists have long been familiar, namely “social solidarity.” As Thomas Hobbes asked centuries ago, how can individuals who are both selfish and dangerous live together in relative harmony? How, in their quest to obtain the best for themselves
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and their kin, can they keep from killing, or at least injuring, competing outsiders? Furthermore, how can creatures that evolved to live in tiny groups of no more than a hundred and fifty reside in nation-states with populations in the hundreds of millions? Why aren't they overwhelmed by torrents of undifferentiated humanity? Why don't they, at least, become confused when dealing with hordes of strangers?

Hobbes thought he had the answer. It was monarchy. He believed that people literally got together to agree to submit to an absolute ruler. In so doing, they entered into a compact that subsequently became binding on their progeny. According to him, only a special individual, one backed by everyone in the community, possessed the strength to keep potential lawbreakers at bay. Only this could control the selfishness of the strong. Today we recognize that this was not the only possible answer. Hobbes lived in a society where monarchies were the rule, but we have found that representative democracies are also workable. They too possess the requisite interpersonal restraints to keep bloodshed within bounds.

Two centuries after Hobbes, Emile Durkheim came up with a different idea. He suggested that there were two kinds of social solidarity; one he called mechanical, the other he labeled organic. The former applied to small societies. Their members presumably worked in harmony because they were alike. Given that their tasks were relatively simple, each could understand and sympathize with the others. Organic solidarity, on the other hand, was more appropriate to larger communities where people might not even know those upon whom they were dependent. These folks were able to get along because they recognized their mutual interdependence. With the tasks required for survival having grown in complexity, no one could meet all of his or her own needs. This put people at the mercy of strangers whom they had to tolerate on peril of failing to thrive. As a result, they found ways to integrate their assignments. Butchers got along with bakers and candlestick makers did business with plumbers. They may not have liked one another, but they cooperated nevertheless.

Today there is another way to understand what holds societies together. It is called Social Domain Theory. This viewpoint tells us that many forces are involved in holding societies together. Some are cultural and some structural. Among the former are normative, cognitive, symbolic, emotional, aesthetic, ritual, and material orders. Among the latter are personal relationship, social hierarchy, social exchange, social role, reconciliation, spatial, and environmental orders. For the
moment we need not worry about what these entail. Their implications will be explored in greater detail later on. For now, what is important to note is that the factors holding societies together are enormously complex. What is also significant is that these transform in nature as societies move from the very small to the very large. This means that what worked for hunter-gatherers will not work for members of techno-commercial societies. That which enables the latter to cooperate is decidedly different from that which did for the former.

The simplest way to describe what has today become necessary to ensure social solidarity is professionalization. Much as is true of doctors and lawyers, ordinary people need to be competent at complicated tasks that are integrated with the tasks of multiple role partners. They have to be self-motivated experts in what they do so that they can do it well. Such persons cannot afford to be passively dependent upon others, but must actively strive to contribute to a multifaceted social tapestry. Were they to opt out of this interlocking community, the whole would suffer from their lack of participation, while they would be consigned to impotent isolation. Complex social roles turn out to be the key to making technological, market-oriented societies function. They are the glue holding millions of strangers together.

Knowledge and technology are also crucial in enabling such communities to function. Modern middle-class societies could not operate without the advancements in science that underlie contemporary forms of transportation, communication, and production. It is not for nothing that we today talk of an information age. Neither the prosperity in which we share, nor the democratic institutions we admire, could exist without these advances. They, as it were, help us to understand and tolerate each other despite our lack of intimate knowledge. This makes it imperative for individuals to be knowledgeable in a way their forebears were not.

Liberalism, in contrast, stresses mechanisms more appropriate for hunter-gatherers. It urges people to participate in the sort of family that flourished within hunting bands. People who depended upon cooperation with others to whom they were related were of necessity close to one another. Not only were they in physical proximity, but in emotional propinquity. Theirs was a personalized world in a way our modern one is not. The reason liberals find the family metaphor congenial—and it is only a metaphor—is that this is the kind of association for which our species evolved. Once, not long ago, all of our ancestors lived in tight-knit communities. These were the sorts of groups for which their
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instinctive reactions and mental abilities prepared them. This was, therefore, the sort of world they found comfortable. It is also the type we find agreeable. We resort to it in our imaginations because our genetic endowment is virtually the same as theirs. The Liberal Dream has merely hitchhiked on this legacy.

Another part of our hunter-gatherer heritage entails face-to-face hierarchies. Sometimes it is asserted that hunting bands were completely egalitarian. People who lived side-by-side under the same material conditions presumably treated each other as exactly the same. No one would have been considered better than anyone else. Certainly no one lived in a mansion or drove a Mercedes Benz. Even so, there were profound inequalities. People depended upon the leadership of community elders, shamans, and superior hunters. They understood that people differed. They also knew that unless they respected the authority of those in charge all might perish. Their equality, such as it was, was in terms of a shared humanity, not one of authority or respect. These latter were earned in face-to-face interactions and treated gingerly because it was understood that no one liked to be forced into submission.

Liberals, in misunderstanding our past, have assumed that complete equality is our natural condition. At the same time, they have assumed the mantle of hunting band elders. In arrogating to themselves the title of “the best and brightest,” they imply that they deserve the right to run the community. Nevertheless, they leave out the factors that govern hierarchical arrangements in massive societies. Hundreds of millions of people cannot treat each other as if they belonged to the same village. They must, for instance, depend upon symbolic indicators of comparative rank. Moreover, what can go wrong among them is not the same as what goes wrong in tiny clearings in the forest. Thus, they have to worry about tyranny in a way their ancestors did not.

The answer to the liberal dilemma is, therefore, not a retreat into conservatism. The solution to what ails modern societies is something different. It is a vision that does not derive from long dead philosophers. Rather professionalization is an idea whose time has come. The difficulty is that it is so new people are not fully cognizant they are living professionalized lives. Nonetheless the possibility of such an awareness exists. Americans have experienced a reorganization of their political landscape before. It took the Civil War to establish a polarity between Democrats and Republicans, but a similar realignment may be in the works—hopefully without a comparable trauma.
If this shift is to come to fruition, more people need to become conscious of what it means to be professionalized. They have to adopt the goal of becoming self-motivated experts and accept of the implications of doing so. Still, if this occurs, the accompanying improvements will not achieve utopian proportions. Professionalization is not a cure-all. To be human is to cope with limitations. Nor will everyone benefit to the same degree. Professionalization is about ameliorization. It is about making small, albeit bona fide, improvements. A professionalized world is one that builds upon multiple successes. In contrast, political movements grounded in fantasy seldom ration their promises. Their appeal depends upon projecting colossal, although fictional, enhancements. A society based on self-motivated expertise can do better. But to the extent that it asks people to be grown-ups, it also asks them to be realistic.

Liberalism, irrespective of its intellectual pretensions, tends not to worry about facts. It does not so much prove its contentions as seduce people with tempting promises. Nor are liberals above bending the truth to make a point. A professionalized perspective ought to be different. It should at least begin by making a solid case for its projections. So far all that has been presented in this first chapter is an assemblage of unsupported assertions. Yet conviction is no substitute for evidence. It would be a grievous mistake to fall into the same trap as liberalism. The attractiveness of an idea does demonstrate its legitimacy. An effort must, therefore, be made to substantiate what has been alleged.

As a consequence, it remains necessary to document the origins of the Liberal Dream. Is that which has been described above what liberals actually believe? And if so, why do they believe it? What were the steps that brought them to this conclusion? It is also necessary to prove that liberalism has failed. The details of how its promises have gone awry must be further dissected. Particular programs and regulations have to be placed on the table and taken apart to see how they tick. Not even this will be enough however. The nature of liberal contradictions needs to be examined. Does liberalism, in fact, sponsor diametrically opposite contentions? If so, why have these inconsistencies remained obscure?

Once this is established, it will be necessary to go into greater detail regarding how societies are held together. In particular, how does Social Domain Theory explain what occurs? At this point, we will be better able to explicate why various political ideologies have exercised
a broad appeal. Not just liberalism, but libertarianism, conservatism, bohemianism, anarchism, and religion will all be fair game for analysis. This is required before the superiority of a professionalized perspective can be demonstrated. Next how these alternatives square with our human and social natures must be dealt with. The result should be an exposition of why we human beings are regularly led astray by false hopes.

After this, it will be necessary to clarify the nature of a professionalized society. This must be done, lest we make the liberal error of failing to establish the manner in which a projected way of life can become reality. But this too is not enough. The details of how professionalization can be executed have to be explored. This in turn must include an explanation of how actual human beings might function in such a society. Communists once counted upon the evolution of “the new communist man,” but this was wishful thinking. Professionalization has to do better. It must demonstrate that actual human beings can be sufficiently self-directed to fill the roles expected of them.

We must likewise demonstrate how people—not all people—but actual people, can save themselves from the losses that beset the human condition. If people are to become what they are capable of being, they must understand how to extricate themselves from defeats that can make life unbearable. What good would it do to prove that professionalization is possible, if individual human beings are incapable of overcoming the obstacles to professionalization? This, to be sure, is a tall order, but one that can be fulfilled.
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