

## Have the Political Parties Coopted the Discussion of Cultural Values in Our Society?

For the January 4, 2019 session of Topical Seminars, please read the following essay by David White and think about the following:

1. Are political labels necessary to describe values in this society?
2. Responsible governing within the American system requires reasoned debate leading to contractual limits on behavior. Given the super-heated rhetoric of political discourse currently on display in our society, is this reasoned debate still possible?
3. We are facing significant problems in preparing for the future of our society. Have we reached the tipping point? Are bold moves essential for moving forward? Are these problems potentially existential for the society?
4. Can we listen to each other, before it is too late?

Thanks,  
Aram and David

There are two terms we need to dispense with straight away in this discussion, as their classical meanings have been coopted in modern parlance to mean something different.

Wikipedia defines liberalism (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberalism>) as:

**Liberalism** is a political and moral philosophy based on liberty and equality. Liberals espouse a wide array of views depending on their understanding of these principles, but they generally support civil rights, democracy, secularism, gender equality, racial equality, internationalism, freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom of religion.

Wikipedia defines conservatism (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservatism>) as:

**Conservatism** is a political and social philosophy promoting traditional social institutions in the context of culture and civilization.

Roger Scruton, in his book Conservatism, an Invitation to the Great Tradition makes the point that “Conservatives and liberals agree on the need for limited government, representative institutions, the separation of powers, and the basic rights of the citizen.” (p.23) He makes the case, and I believe it may be well-supported, that the difference between a conservative and liberal approach to governmental interest lies not in the fundamental recognition of the role of the state, but of how this role is to be approached and, thus, to be maintained.

Conservatives and liberals alike believe strongly that the individual is the paramount aspect of a society. In early liberal views, the ideal aspired to was the power of individual liberty against the power of the sovereign. Both conservatives and liberals view with horror the possibilities of corruption when power lies unchecked in the hands of sovereign individuals or agencies.

The goals of liberty and equality, both essential to the identity of the individual as the supreme concept in a governmental system, are easily put at odds with one another. Liberty refers to an ideal in which

each individual is unrestrained to pursue his or her life in a way that makes sense to the individual and according to his or her talents and opportunities. The *will* of the individual is inviolable, even at the expense of the individual. Equality demands that each individual, sovereign in his/her right to approach life individually, must enjoy the same opportunity afforded to others in society. In this case, the *existence* of the individual is inviolable, even at the expense of one's will. This, then, leads to conflict. Equality of opportunity requires that this opportunity be regulated by a governing agency for it to be primary. Therefore, equality of opportunity requires that individual liberty be regulated and, thus, potentially limited by this governing agency.

Both liberal and conservative viewpoints accept this conflict. Reason dictates that compromise of individual liberty is essential in any social undertaking. Additionally, reason demonstrates that the individual's interest can be furthered within a social structure in a manner superior to that of the individual living as an isolationist. Thus, the person willing to sacrifice some degree of individual liberty and the person willing to sacrifice some degree of individual equality may both reasonably expect that they will, ultimately, be better off than those unwilling to do so.

The idea of there being a binary contrast between "Liberal" and "Conservative" is, therefore, limited almost to the point of being meaningless. Figure A, below, is a representation of a four-quadrant approach to an expanded idea of political conflict as described by my son, Jordan White. He writes "One could be a liberty-loving individualist, an equality-loving individualist, a liberty-loving collectivist, or an equality-loving collectivist."

In the Liberty-to-Equality continuum, there is a conflict within the person's ability to determine which individual liberties are to be compromised, when these must be compromised, and what value the person and society as a whole should place on this compromise. Individual liberty dictates that the values associated with these choices are not universal. How, then, does society decide?

Adherents to either end of this continuum would stress that these limits are best imposed through contractual obligations under a system of common law- assigned by representative government and enforced by obligatory legal structures within a judicial system, established and maintained by the collective. The difference between them lies in how these obligations are to be identified and enforced.

In the Collective-to-Individual continuum, there is a conflict within the person's identity itself.

The Republican party, of late, identifying its values as "conservative," has held cultural values and societal norms in high esteem and has identified these as fundamental to the identity of the collective and, thus, as vital to the identity of the individual. They hold that the individual is a product of the society. His or her life has meaning, at least in part, through the lens of the society in which she or he resides. Thus, the Republican insists that these societal values and norms hold sway in establishing the limits necessary to ensure individual liberty and an orderly society- she believes that these limits are best imposed primarily through cultural traditions and norms understood within the limited society and enforced therein. The Republican, then, would likely place himself or herself to the right of the crux of the horizontal axis in Figure A.

The Democratic party, on the other hand, claims that it values individual identity above that of the society, believing that egalitarianism should be primary, even in the face of established cultural identity. The individual is a product of nature and, while society certainly has had influence, perhaps profoundly, in her development, she is responsible, ultimately, only to her own destiny. Therefore, necessary limits

to the individual in society should be established through a process of rational debate, wherein the individual expresses his needs and his willingness to compromise in terms of his values and vision. The desired result is a formal contractual obligation, enforceable unto and of itself. And, this obligation is dynamic, able to change as new information becomes available, as new opportunities for growth are identified, and as the needs of the individual as well as those of the society develop. A Democrat would place herself or himself to the left of the crux of the horizontal axis in Figure A.

Both viewpoints accept that an influential power, greater than the individual, should hold sway in the development and enforcement of the obligations amongst and between the citizenry. This power might be manifest in the society as a whole through representative government, or through the marketplace (whether this be mercantile or cultural- the marketplace of ideas), or through the imposition of social norms and pressures. All three of these have the potential for corruption though. A representative government, put in place and monitored by majority rule, has the inherent potential for Tocqueville's tyranny of the majority. Rule through the marketplace holds the possibility of an oligarchy. And rule through social norms and pressures easily develops into a form of theocratic governing structure by requiring that the individual pledge fidelity to a higher power represented by a cultural elite.

The United States Constitution, the document that identifies the United States as an entity, establishes that the governing institutions are required to be secular, thereby eliminating an established religious hierarchy as one possible arbitrator of individual conflict within the society at large. And while it does not specifically state that the national economy will be based on a free-enterprise system, its interest in individual liberty and freedom of choice provides the basis for a system of free trade while also allowing for the elected government to impose laws governing fair trade practices, thus granting sovereignty to the government to regulate the marketplace. This, then, leaves only the elected government standing to establish formal limitations and governing realities on individual behavior. And, in a compelling "twist," the document specifically limits the reach and power of the elected government in a myriad of ways.

Therefore, it seems clear that the viewpoint of limiting the will through regulating behaviors should be approached only through means of rational debate and contractual obligation. And the American Constitution provides for this through a tripartite approach to legislating behavior. An elected congress deliberates on and passes legislation, an elected chief executive signs this legislation into law and takes responsibility for enactment and enforcement, and a judiciary, beholden to both the chief executive and the congress, evaluates the legitimacy and consistency of the law and acts as the arbiter of the law in civil and criminal proceedings. Thus, limiting individual and corporate behaviors is made arduous and requires multiple viewpoints to be put into place.

The Constitution also provides for the running of the government to be done through a republican style of democratic choice- the people, each acting individually, periodically staff the government through democratic election. To enjoy electoral success, candidates for the elected offices need to establish themselves as in line with the identifying cultural values of the electorate and they need to assure the public that, once in office, they will legislate from a perspective of this identification. Ideally, this should provide a balance between that of individual identity and established cultural ideals and values as to which viewpoint reigns supreme in the realities of governance.

In modern political conflict in the United States, a significant rift has developed in weighing the balance between equality and individual liberty- and this is seen most prominently in the approach to establishing societal rules. Since the establishment of the "Great Society" in the 1960's, values of equality based on a commitment to egalitarianism have crashed against the values of cultural tradition

to a degree that proponents of each side have erected intellectual walls against the other and have taken to recalcitrance with regard to their vision for the country as a whole.

Colin Kaepernick knelt in the public square and called for attention to societal institutions systematically violating the civil rights of members of the community. Frustrated by what he saw as the failure of the established governmental structure to address this problem, Kaepernick used his platform as a celebrity, turning to the marketplace of ideas by and to what he thought were social norms to call out these violations and to seek the community's help in addressing them.

But he was met with resistance. Those who revere traditional values, also turning to the marketplace of ideas, called "foul," claiming that his actions undermined the fabric of the community itself. Yes, they understood that peaceful self-expression and protest for redress of grievances is fundamental to our cultural identity. But they felt that Kaepernick's actions were heinous to a point that they were willing to put aside their support of such expression. They claimed that Kaepernick's behavior was insulting to cultural symbols we hold in reverence. They claimed that his behavior undermined the social tethers which hold our cultural identity together. Certainly, some were motivated by values that fall short of those we value as fundamental to our identity. But many were conscientious in their view that Kaepernick's actions were out of balance to the context of his ideas of redress.

Those who supported Kaepernick's stance were quick to escalate the other side's concern beyond that of the specific redress in Kaepernick's motivation. Instead of listening to the concern of the undermining of a cultural symbol unrelated to the point Kaepernick was making, they belittled the other side's response as being, of necessity, "racist." To a degree, this claim was valid in that Kaepernick's concerns were rooted in what he believed to be racist policies. And, frankly, some of those angry over Kaepernick's actions were, in fact, responding out of a racist underpinning of their cultural view. However, many on the oppositional side vociferously denied that their objection was based in racism. They claimed that, while they supported Kaepernick's point, they felt that redress during the national anthem prior to a culturally iconic activity was a move so radical to the point that it distracted from the grievance he was trying to make. In that it was insulting to the fabric of this society based, as it is, in the fundamentals of individual liberty, they felt that Kaepernick's actions, of themselves, had become the point.

Governmental structures responded in the worst possible way. Eager politicians pounced on the conflict to score political points with the base of their political support within the community and to throw rhetorical barbs at those of the "other side." After a short time being front and center in the news, the episode has faded from the public consciousness. Now, nearly two-and-a-half years later, we have not addressed Kaepernick's concerns in any foundational way. Kaepernick has been discarded by the NFL and now is seeking relief through civil lawsuits. Companies have embraced or rejected Kaepernick as a cultural and advertising symbol to meet commercial ends by exploiting his reach within targeted societal demographics.

This episode became a concrete example of the recalcitrance and the shallowness of the partisan tribalism that has taken hold in our political discourse and governmental processes. The lines of continuum in Figure A, essential to constructive debate, have been thrown asunder in support of meaningless labels. We have retreated to our battle encampments, unwilling to recognize that doing so surrenders the foundations of our effective governmental structures to the tyranny of the secular theocracy. The higher power might not be represented in a deity, yet it requires our unquestioning fidelity just the same. "Progressive," "Conservative," "Tea Party," "Socialist." Do we truly understand

these terms, or do we remain beholden to the high priests of these movements who appear in the media to represent ideas on our behalf? Has it become impossible to listen to the ideas of those on the “other side”?

Our political camps have divided into those who identify as Republican- “conservative” - and those who identify as Democrat- “liberal.” As outlined above, these terms, of their own, are essentially meaningless. However, we need to keep them in mind as our politicians have divided into voting blocs based on these titles. Essentially, those in the “conservative” voting bloc tend to identify in the upper right quadrant of our Figure A. Those identifying as “liberal” would see themselves in the bottom left. Oh, certainly, wishing to identify with their voting constituencies, politicians temper their labels. I suspect, also, were we to draw a small circle around the crux of the axes meeting point, most of our populace and most of our politicians would fall within this philosophical area.

On December 7, 2018, Topical Seminars hosted a seminar on the growing national debt, the fiscal deficit, taxation, spending on “entitlement” programs, and general issues related to governmental fiscal priorities. There was some interest in continuing this discussion further. Thus, please consider the following in light of the previous material in this essay. To make things somewhat simpler, I will revert to using the terms “liberal” and “conservative” based on the paragraph above.

There is a difference between the liberal and the conservative approaches to governance with regard to how each side approaches the growing fiscal debt crisis as presented in our December 7<sup>th</sup> session. Both liberal and conservative politicians have addressed this crisis in campaign rhetoric and on the floor of the legislative bodies. I suspect that, were we to poll individual members of the legislative and administrative bodies of our national government, we would probably hear similar concerns about the ballooning national debt. The differences would be in the approaches offered by each side toward a solution.

Conservative politicians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century decried the move toward government entitlement programs as undermining the national identity of a rugged-individualist, capitalistic approach to one’s life. Laws and regulations requiring that one pay into programs which benefit others seems counter to an individualist approach to economics and, thus, to the fundamental ideal of individual liberty. The large entitlement programs of Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, scrape against the ideals of the conservative economist, causing angst about potential for corruption and generating a feeling that the government is creating a “nanny state,” an anathema to the conservative viewpoint of laissez faire capitalism as fundamental to our cultural identity.

Liberal politicians, on the other hand, see these programs as fundamental to the security of the societal structure. They believe that relieving the individual of the fear of destitution from the travails of the marketplace and/or from catastrophic medical threats generates a stronger economic foundation of society as a whole, thus freeing individual economic pursuit to focus on self-actualization. This stability, then, addresses cultural unrest resulting from individual crises by generating an egalitarian structure for individual economic pursuit.

These fundamental differences are also manifest in the differing approaches to public infrastructure, including education, regulations on trade, the environment, etc. Equally important, they are also manifest in a differing approach to taxation.

Both liberal and conservative politicians understand the need for public infrastructure and the need to impose the taxes necessary to support this. I suspect we would find widespread agreement amongst politicians and the electorate on both sides of the political aisle on the need for significant community resources to be put into service for:

1. public safety, national defense, transportation support, fundamental education of the citizenry, means of exchange (currency), elections, and similar traditional roles of government.

But what about using resources to generate equality of opportunity?

2. health care, higher education, job safety, fair-trade practices, poverty amelioration, etc.

All of these efforts require the compromise of individual liberties in the service of societal goals. Those listed in 1 are fundamental to assure the individual the opportunity to approach life in a manner supported by the shepherding of community resources. Those listed in 2, however, move into the realm of enforced egalitarianism. Am I really my brother's keeper with regard to health care? What if my brother chooses to live in a manner that is fundamentally unhealthy while I choose behavior more conducive to good health? Should I still be responsible for his health needs? Is higher education really a right, or is it a privilege limited to those who value it enough to find a way to pay for it? Should the government regulate the safety of the job site and establish a minimum wage requirement when each employee therein has the unlimited right to work elsewhere? Do welfare programs encourage idleness, thus creating a cycle of poverty resulting in the destabilization of the community?

And what about the form of taxation? Is progressive income taxation an anathema to the fundamental value of rewarding hard work? Do value-added taxation policies ([https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Value-added\\_tax](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Value-added_tax)) make more sense than individual or corporate income taxes in a free society? Does progressive taxation ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progressive\\_tax](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progressive_tax)) make sense, or should a free society apply a regressive taxation policy ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regressive\\_tax](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regressive_tax))?

Progressive tax policy is a form of income-redistribution, essential to an egalitarian society. But it is fundamentally in conflict with the goal of a free society. A policy of flat tax might make sense ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flat\\_tax](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flat_tax)) philosophically but, in application, such a tax disproportionately affects lower-income brackets of the population; and these are the most important with regard to economic movement in day-to-day spending habits. This is true of regressive tax as well.

Macroeconomic principles and monetary policy on a societal level are beyond the interest and, thus, the understanding of most of the citizenry. We want the economy to work for us in the security of our home towns wherein we can optimize our freedom to choose how to spend the dollars we have earned. When the governmental agencies ask us for more money, we become suspicious that there might be inefficiencies or corruption in the systems put in place to meet the needs of our neighborhoods, our cities and states, and the nation as a whole. And the further removed, both physically and intellectually, these legislators and executives are from us, the more we feel we have little say in the decisions being made. Therefore, we respond when politicians say they want to make the U.S. government small enough that we may "drown it in the bathtub" should we choose to do so. We grow simplistic in our political sloganeering (free college for all, universal health care, make America great again, yes we can).

I believe it is vital that we begin to listen to and consider positions that are different from, even counter to, our arguments on how to solve the problems facing us as a nation and as a culture. We believe it when our politicians tell us that they can solve our problems easily and painlessly. We cheer when the politicians we support offer simplistic slogans in place of detailed policy statements. And, because we do

such things, our elected officials cannot dare to address the challenges facing us with any meaningful depth.

It's time to start asking difficult questions. Do we support Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid? Why? What do they mean to us as Americans? Do these make us a nanny state? Are they effective? What sacrifices are we willing to make to ensure their continued presence?

What are our national security goals? Do these require both diplomacy and military might equally, or should one of these reign supreme? If so, which one? Why? Where does trade fit into this? A strong economy is a powerful means of national security. A sustained strong economy requires a growing population. Where does border security fit into this equation? What about globalization?

Do we support a progressive form of income taxation? Why? Knowing that business taxes are always passed on to the consumer, these, too, are a form of tax on the individual. Do we support this? Why?

Whether you are conservative or liberal in your politics, how would someone from a differing viewpoint answer these questions? How could you speak to them "in their language" about these issues? What would you need to hear from them to believe they validate your viewpoint?

Where do we go from here?

**Figure A**

