

LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE THOUGHT
– RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT, ITS CITIZENS AND THE
INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

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Ask Not What Your Country Can Do For You.....

Role of Government – Conservative philosophy, in its purest form, believes in government’s role as defined, or limited, by the U.S. Constitution. This is a fairly narrow definition by current standards. It demands a sense of independence and self-reliance for individual and corporate citizens. Liberals tend to have a broader concept of the role of government. First, they consider the Constitution a “living, breathing document” – to be used in the context of international law, moral relativism, and moral equivalence. Recently I heard a liberal speaker say that the greatest employment and corporate opportunities come from strong involvement by the Federal government. Liberals believe the greatest tool for creating prosperity is government. Conservatives believe the greatest threat to creating prosperity is government.

Liberal suggestions for health care reform are attacked by conservatives as moving toward socialized medicine and away from a more creative, productive, free enterprise system. Desirable or not, the reforms do define a new broader role for government.

One theory states that the reason liberals look to the government to “take care” of the population is their elevation of “financial security” over “liberty”. Some liberals feel the government should be there to “take care” of citizens “from cradle to grave” – and they believe that should be everyone’s priority. This could take the form of a comprehensive system of “safety nets”. For example, liberals tend to think it’s a major role of government to deliver jobs to the economy. A conservative would be more inclined to say the government should merely provide an environment in which businesses have the opportunity to do so. The conservative would come much closer to an emphasis on the concept of “liberty”, as they define it – thus with more of an emphasis on self-reliance. That can be a scary proposition for many.

Nanny State – Taking a slight turn to the “left” from the last point, liberals are accused of seeking to control citizens beyond what is necessary or desirable. Conservatives accuse liberals of desiring, albeit with good intentions, to be involved in funding as many programs and aspects of our lives as possible. Government is sincerely thought by many on the Left to “know best”. But, conservatives say that we can’t escape the fact that even with the best intentions, such extensive funding brings unacceptable control. I saw a 2008 campaign slogan that characterized the liberal desire like this: “Let us lessen your pain” and “I feel your pain”. But it didn’t add, “just give us the power”. This may be sincere but it is considered by the Right to be wrong and misguided.

Author Eric Alterman says liberalism is limited only by what is “deliverable justice or fairness”. He wrote: “What is not deliverable by government, we leave to parents, and

clergy, and the like”. In other words, in this person’s opinion, our government is only limited by what it can’t practically deliver – the balance is left for others. Wow! What a contrast to the conservative philosophy of having the government’s role limited to what is specifically provided for in the Constitution.

What Do They Hear Us Say? – We heard in the recent campaign that Americans were “bitter” due to their economic plight – “I hear your bitterness and pain” liberal politicians said. A conservative, reacting to the same circumstance would more likely say “I hear your sadness” – but may not even have that to say – they tend to be much more matter-of-fact about situations. Liberals have a thing about “listening” and “fixing things” – prompting the individual to request that government do “what is best for me”. A conservative would likely claim that they need to do what is best for America, which will also be best for the individual.

Government and Unions vs. Business – Liberals would say that businesses are inherently inclined not to have citizens’ best interests at heart. Therefore we need even more aggressive intervention by government and unions. I know of very few conservatives who would even attempt to argue that any individual business is set up to have the public’s best interest at their philosophical core. Rather, business’ central focus is to legally and ethically make a profit. They would also argue that the forces of the free enterprise system will do a better job, in the long run, of maximizing the public’s benefit. Well known economist Milton Friedman made the case in plain English: “The case for free enterprise, for competition, is that it’s the only system that will keep the capitalists from having too much power...The virtue of free enterprise capitalism is that it sets one businessman against another, and it’s a most effective device for control”. I would add that it’s not a perfect control, but better than the alternative.

Conservatives would argue that labor unions are not working for the public’s interest. And government? Remember the alleged liberal habit of making “good intentions” the real measure of success. There are few better examples of “The Law of Unintended Consequences” than many of our government programs. Conservatives would believe in the benefits of “free trade” of goods and services. Liberals would advance the concept of “fair trade”, and support barriers that shield domestic industries against foreign competition. Conservatives would contend that would result in reducing the incentive to innovate and change.

Taxes – Our tax system is the means by which we pay for government programs and how, some believe, social outcomes are encouraged and resource redistribution is accomplished. I recently came across a new argument. Conservatives typically accuse liberals of manipulating the economy in the wrong way and providing self-defeating incentives through tax policies. An often argued issue is the appropriate tax rates to be applied to capital gains. A conservative philosophy has consistently been that taxation on capital (e.g. capital gains taxes) discourages one of the most important forces in our economy – that of investing in business which provide the cutting edge of job creation and which ultimately results in more overall tax collections. A liberal philosophy has usually been that these tax rates should be raised. A liberal writer recently expressed a concern that lowering capital gains (here’s the

new part) hinders the free market by inducing people to make the wrong investment/spending choices. A higher rate “would discourage such wasteful avoidance”.

Times and philosophies have changed in the last 50 years. In 1962, Democratic President John F. Kennedy stated at a news conference: “It is a paradoxical truth that tax rates are too high and tax revenues are too low and the soundest way to raise the revenues in the long run is to cut the rates now Cutting taxes now is not to incur a budget deficit, but to achieve the more prosperous, expanding economy which can bring a budget surplus”.

Gun Control – The Right believes that the Second Amendment confers to an individual the right to keep and bear arms. The Founding Fathers originally granted this right to protect against tyranny by government. The Left would disagree that the amendment guarantees the right to own a gun – only that there exists the right of states to maintain militias. And in the context of a “living, breathing” Constitution, the Left would contend the original relevance of this amendment is no longer practical and that the Right’s interpretation of the Second Amendment is an unfortunate impediment to public safety.

What is Religious Freedom? – The First Amendment deals with religion as follows: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion; or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”. The liberal interpretation has referred to this as the concept of “separation of church and state”. They believe it implies that any interaction between religion and government is a violation of the Constitution – e.g. prayer in schools or religious symbols on government property. Conservatives argue that the original purpose of the provision still governs – to protect citizens from the imposition of a religion by the government. They contend that liberals are trying to promote “freedom from religion” rather than “freedom of religion”. Conservatives go on to point out that religious terminology remained in our founding documents, thereby implying the current extreme interpretation was not the original intent. Further, they have examined the complete discussions by the Founding Fathers regarding the First Amendment as contained in the Congressional Records from June 7 to September 25, 1789. Nowhere in these discussions is the term “separation of church and state” ever mentioned.

Patriotism – Many on the Left are much more ambivalent about, and often hostile to, overt displays of American Patriotism. The Right is much more likely to vocally encourage such displays in their homes, neighborhoods, and municipalities. The Left has caused the term “flag waving” to have a negative connotation.

Mottos – The French Revolution’s guiding principles were “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”. Some on the Left would be more comfortable with that than the common motto of “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness”. Conservative writer Dennis Prager envisions a new “American Trinity” developing. According to him, the traditional conservative “trinity” is “E Pluribus Unum, Liberty, and In God We Trust”. He sees “E Pluribus Unum” being replaced by the concept of “Multiculturalism”; “Liberty” being replaced by “Equality”, and “In God We Trust” being replaced by “Secularism”.

The familiar American motto “E Pluribus Unum” means “out of many, one”. It represents our unity and is based on recognition of our inherent diversity. Liberals would interpret this as unity of thought throughout a diverse culture. Conservatives would interpret this as celebrating a common unique culture, not blurred by such things as multiculturalism. The Right would accuse liberals of viewing unity as all coming together under one philosophy – presumably liberal. The Right would be comfortable with some disunity and don’t see uniform thought as inherently self-redeeming - but it does believe we should all fit within the same American culture.

Dealing with the World

European Vision – It is argued that some on the Left think that the U.S. should follow policies more like those in Europe, and would even pattern some judicial decisions on certain European precedents. Some contend that the Left prefers Europe’s quasi-pacifism, cradle-to-grave socialism, egalitarianism, and secularism. The Right would say we should first find out whether the results that they get are better than the results that we get. They point out that the U.S. leads the world in too many areas for us to start imitating those who are trailing behind. Examples they give include: Europe has more generous minimum wage laws and at the same time have much higher rates of unemployment and longer periods of unemployment, than in the U.S.; the U.S. far outstrips Europe in the development of pharmaceuticals; and America’s per capita output, in terms of purchasing power, is the highest of any major nation.

There was an interesting quote in a recent Harvard Magazine: “Americans, on average, have a higher tolerance for income inequality than their European counterparts. American attitudes focus on equality of opportunity, while Europeans tend to see fairness in equal outcomes”. Equality, and the differing opinions of what it means, is a recurring theme in this report. I have read that the European practice of “statism trumping religion” has been influencing America for many decades – even centuries.

World Citizens – The Left fears nationalism in general (a liberal European fear since World War I, and a liberal American fear since the 60s). This view came through very clearly when Barack Obama emphasized to those present at his German rally that they were all “citizens of the world” and “the burdens of global citizenship continue to bind us together”. Some on the Left seem to prefer to identify as citizens of the world. The Right would identify first as citizens of America.

Many on the Left embrace the idea that the United Nations and other multinational organizations are imbued with a moral authority not found in “nation-states” like ours. Senator John Kerry, during his campaign for the presidency, described American foreign and defense policy as only being legitimate when it passed a “global test” – in other words, approval by the international community.

Another alarming statement recently surfaced – from a senior U.N. official. The subject was the disarming of some citizens in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. There had been considerable concern that this would set an unfortunate precedent. The U.N. official made a

statement to the effect that, while she understood Americans were reluctant to part with their firearms, they had better get used to being “citizens of the world” just like everybody else. In his book, “The Audacity of Hope”, Senator Obama wrote: “When the world’s sole superpower willingly restrains its power and abides by internationally agreed-upon standards of conduct, it sends a message that these rules are worth following”. Threats to our traditional sovereignty come subtly from within and without.

But what do Americans think about the issue of international influence on American policy. A recent Rasmussen survey asked the question: Should the United States do what its allies want or should the allies do what the United States wants? Americans were polarized to an extent that surprised me. Republicans responded 66 percent to 13 percent that allies should do what the U.S. wants. Democrats responded that the U.S. should do what the allies want 39 percent to 30 percent. This is a very serious divide among our citizens. Interestingly, voters under 30 came out on the side of allies doing what the U.S. wants, 57 percent to 28 percent.

American Exceptionalism – The Left seems to regard the notion of American exceptionalism as chauvinism. Conservatives would tend to proclaim that, in spite of all its mistakes, America has done more than any international organization or institution, and more than any other country, to improve the world; and that traditional American values form the finest value system any society has ever devised and lived by. Many on the Left would regard world opinion, e.g. the U.N., as a better arbiter of what is good than is America. On the other hand the Right has a low opinion of the U.N.’s moral compass and of world opinion. Most on the Right would consider the U.N. as having a much poorer record of stopping genocide and other evils than America has.

Globalization – Liberals have grasped onto globalization as the cause for many of our problems – particularly its impact on production and employment – outsourcing jobs, etc. This concern seems to contradict their alleged “world citizenship” view. Conservatives would argue that there is strong evidence that the global economy has had a relatively minor role in changing our industries and workforce. Rather, they argue, it is a technological and skills revolution which has shifted the type of jobs we have in the U.S.

Kind and Gentle? Or Tough Talk! – The Left envisions a world not hemmed in on all sides by inherent constraints and the painful trade-offs that these constraints imply. Theirs is a world where there are attractive, win-win “solutions” in place of those ugly trade-offs in the world. Theirs is a world where we can just talk to opposing nations and work things out, instead of having to pour tons of money into military equipment to keep them at bay. Most conservatives probably wish Ronald Reagan could have talked the Soviets into being nicer, instead of having to spend all that money on military equipment in order to bring the Cold War to an end. They would say that experience makes them skeptical about that “kinder and gentler” approach and the vision behind it. The Left has been criticized for attaching too much importance to being loved. Conservatives would try to convince you that they would rather be respected than loved – particularly if that comes from doing what is truly right.

International negotiations, in the eye of a liberal, are most successful if conducted between two equals. Conservatives would try to negotiate from a position of strength. Liberals have accused conservatives of not pursuing negotiations aggressively enough in time of international crisis. That's at least partially correct because conservatives are less confident in the outcome of negotiations because they feel there will be too much capitulation on our part. They just want to win – plain and simple. Another way to contrast their respective attitudes regarding international negotiations and relationships involves their respective descriptions of the “Cold War”. Some Liberals viewed the conflict as between two “superpowers” – essentially “moral equivalents”. Conservatives had a more “good vs. evil” perspective.

National Defense – The Left wants a world, and therefore an America, devoid of nuclear weapons. The Right wants America to have the best nuclear weapons. The Right trusts American might more than universal disarmament. Liberals believe a world without nuclear weapons is achievable. Conservatives believe that since the technology exists, evil men and nations will obtain and use them. Therefore the Right does not believe in the Left's goal of America and its enemies having the same weapons. They argue that the “enemy” certainly won't let this happen.

Conservatives believe in peace through strength, and thus support strong national defense, and particularly in this era of “Islamofascism”, a proactive foreign policy (called by some the Bush Doctrine). Many liberals would disagree with use of such a strong word to describe terrorism, and would reject preemptory military policies. Also they would believe in strength through peace, and believe they can better influence the behavior of enemies by demonstrating our good intentions.

This conflict of national defense philosophies isn't new. On Christmas Eve 2008 Samuel P. Huntington, the eminent Harvard political scientist died. He was a devout liberal and “New Deal Democrat” who nevertheless appalled other liberal academics going back over 50 years. In the 1950s he argued that protecting our liberal political and social order required a professional military that held a far less idealistic view of human nature than the general citizenry. His fellow liberals misread his opinions as a defense of militarism. In fact, he calmly argued further that liberals favor individualism because they take national security for granted – and that conservatives understand that national security is not in the natural order of things. He felt that to protect the liberal order which he valued, required rejecting the standard liberal view of good, evil and human nature. Many years later, still not compromising with his fellow liberals, he was not impressed with achieving the end of the Cold War. Rather he argued that the Western liberal democracy hadn't been vindicated as a universal ideal. It was, in fact, headed into a time of multipolar conflict in which culture was the dominant factor in international relations. That and his references to “Islam's bloody borders” was heresy to many multi-culturalists and “world citizen groups”. But he was right – that's what eventually happened as we are now experiencing.

Clash of Civilizations – Many on the Left feel that the U.S. created the current clash between Muslims and the Western world. They have said “... (in 2003), it was a relatively small

number of young Muslim men. Now, thanks to this clash of civilizations we've created, the threat could come from anywhere."

It must follow then that prior to 2003 the Islamic world was morally equivalent to Western civilization. And before our invasion of Iraq, the Muslim world was populated by peaceful young men; violent Islamists were made by America, not by any aspects of Islamic culture and values. Tell that to the blacks of the Sudan, to the Israelis, and to the Algerians who have lost tens of thousands to Islamic terror. And tell that to the families of the hundreds of thousands, even into the millions, who were murdered and maimed in Iraq by young Muslim men prior to America deposing Saddam Hussein.

And as we were recently reminded by a member of the British Parliament: "Ten years ago, in November 1997, 50 Swiss tourists rose early to visit the Valley of the Kings across the Nile from Luxor in Egypt. Suddenly from the hills came a group of Islamists. They shot, disemboweled and decapitated the tourists". And don't forget the first attack on the World Trade Center – and on and on. The majority of terrorist events occurred prior to the presidency of George W. Bush.

Conservative commentator and writer Larry Elder recently wrote: "Republicans believe what they see, and Democrats see what they believe". That's a little tough and perhaps a bit more clever than fair.

Next I discuss the contrasting opinions on global warming.