

LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE – TWO WORLD VIEWS – THE BASIS FOR THEIR DIFFERENCES

Stephen L. Bakke – July 18, 2011

I have written several reports on “liberal and conservative thought” in an attempt to identify differences, contrast viewpoints, and gather insight into these ever more polarized world views. Recently, I was challenged to “reduce it all down” into a simpler discussion and explanation. OK, that makes sense – less is more, and simpler is better!

The first thing I did was to list major issues for which there are major differences and debates between the two groups. The fact that recent years have experienced a polarizing of opinion and cultural shifts makes this task (sadly) somewhat easier. Here are the concepts I identified:

Budgets and Spending	National Debt	Debt Ceiling
Tax Policy Freedom	Dealing with Entitlements	Health Care Reform
Government vs. Business	Our Form of Government	Definition of Marriage
The Meaning of Liberty	The Meaning of Freedom	Role of the Judiciary
Federal Regulations	The Meaning of Freedom	Class Warfare
Free Trade Legislation	Public Sector Unions	Global Warming
World Citizenship	European Vision	American Exceptionalism
Globalization	Immigration Policy	Multiculturalism
The Role of the U.N.	The Role of NATO	Housing Market Solutions
Gun Control	Unemployment Solutions	Public vs. Private Education
National Defense Policy	Nuclear Weapons Policy	Military Conflicts
Role of Religion	Religious Freedom	Political Correctness
Moral Relativism	Moral Equivalence	Secularism
Attitude toward the Press	What is a Victim?	What is Evil?
Who is the Enemy?	(and on and on)	

These are all sources of conflict between the competing philosophies dominating our nation. I believe these have all been “spawned,” in some way, from one of these three “mother issues”:

- The Definition of Equality
- The Role of the U.S. Government in our Lives
- The Role for the United States in the International Community

The Definition of Equality – Ever Heard of Egalitarianism?



That is a copy of the line actually penned by Thomas Jefferson and appearing in the Declaration of Independence. The concept of equality was prominent in the minds of our Founders as they

envisioned a government created by “We the People of the United States.” Nevertheless, the meaning of “equality” has become a point of disagreement for these competing philosophies.

The definition of equality for a person on the Right would emphasize the concept of equal opportunity. The Left focuses on equality of the result. Liberals tend to infer unequal opportunities when observing unequal outcomes – i.e. some believe strongly that equal outcomes result if people have truly equal opportunities. This is known as egalitarianism.

Critics might say the Left values equality of outcome above other values because it yearns for an America in which all people have similar amounts of material possessions. That may be what compels the Left to advocate legislation that they themselves describe as “redistributive.” The Left wants to “divvy up” the pie. The Right contends that their policies would more effectively “expand the pie” and they sincerely believe that by doing so, everyone would end up with more.

Cynics might claim that liberalism seeks to deliver equality in the form of “equal dependence” on government by more and more people, for more and more things. Some on the Right have contended that the Left hates inequality even more than it hates evil – perhaps even considering inequality as the ultimate evil.

The far left even goes so far as to say that unequal outcomes are largely the result of “the luck of the draw” and resist endorsing the results of other variables such as ambition, ingenuity, and natural ability, which don’t occur in equal proportions in the population. Liberal economist J. Bradford DeLong wrote: “An unequal society cannot help but be an unjust society Any society that justifies itself on a hope of equality of opportunity cannot help but be undermined by too great a degree of inequality of result.”

Conservatives argue that differences are inherent in our world, and occur in situations where discrimination is neither present nor possible – and that general prosperity and liberty are far more important than simply the equality of outcome.

The Role of the U.S. Government in our Lives

– A Nanny State, or “Ask Not What Your Country Can Do For You

Liberal author Eric Alterman says the federal government 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 Alterman’s opinion, our government is limited only 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.

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 compared with more liberal interpretations. Conservatives contend their concept of limited government is based on our Founders’ belief in independence and self-reliance for individuals and organizations. Liberals tend to have a broader concept of the role of government. First, they tend to consider the

Constitution a “living, breathing document” – to be used in the context of international law, moral relativism, and moral equivalence.

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” – this could take the form of a comprehensive system of “safety nets”. And many liberals think it is a major role of government to deliver jobs to the economy. They believe the greatest tool for creating prosperity is government. I recently heard a very “progressive” speaker proclaim that the greatest employment and corporate opportunities come from strong involvement by the Federal government.

On the other hand, conservatives believe the greatest threat to creating prosperity is government. A conservative would be more inclined to say the government should merely provide an environment in which businesses have the opportunity to create jobs and prosperity. The conservative would come much closer to an emphasis on the concept of “liberty”, as they define it, and with more of an emphasis on self-reliance.

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 “know best” according to many sincere liberals. But conservatives contend that we can’t escape the fact that even with the best intentions, extensive government funding brings unacceptable government control.

The Role for the United States in the International Community – Isolate? Become Dedicated “World Citizens”? Or Something In Between

The Left tends to turn away from U.S. nationalism in general (nationalism has been a liberal European concern since World War I, and a liberal American concern 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 liberals seem to prefer to identify first as citizens of the world.

It is argued that some on the Left think 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 European practice of “statism trumping religion” does seem to have influenced the U.S. to at least a limited degree.

Regarding applying a deferential view of Europe, Conservatives would say that first we should find out whether the results that Europe gets 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 historical 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.

The Left seems to regard the notion of American exceptionalism as chauvinistic. 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.

Many on the Left regard world opinion and international authority, e.g. the U.N., as a better arbiter of what is good than is the U.S. On the other hand the Right has a low opinion of the U.N.’s moral compass and tends to be less concerned with world opinion. Conservatives like to proclaim that, in spite of its many mistakes, the U.S. has done more than any other international organization, institution or country, to improve the world; and that traditional American values form the finest value system any society has ever devised and lived by.

An alarming (to me anyway) statement surfaced a couple years ago 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”, Barack 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.**

What do Americans think about the issue of international influence on American policy? A 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. **I give that an enthusiastically optimistic, “HMMMMMM?!”**

So concludes my “simplified” version of the basis for differences between sincere and committed liberals on the one side, and sincere and committed conservatives on the other. I’m a conservative and that may explain some of my interpretations and comments – but that’s OK too!