

LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE THOUGHT ... WILL THE “TWIN” EVER MEET?

Stephen L. Bakke – December 2008 and April 2011

The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself.

Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan

Professions

Liberal reporters, judges, professors and others have been accused of/praised for exhibiting extreme bias. But why? Critics believe that liberal professionals see their profession as a means to an end, not an end in itself. That end is the social transformation of society, meaning the promoting of “social justice” as liberals understand that term.

Conservatives believe that most liberal reporters expand the goal of news reporting beyond just to reporting news as objectively as possible. They believe reporters also want to promote social justice and the social transformation of society. I read a recent quote from a highly placed person at a major newspaper that essentially expressed that it part of their job to make ethical judgments when deciding how to frame a report. Will this evaluation now trump reporting only the sober facts of a story?

Conservatives would contend that for most liberal judges, one purpose of being a judge is to promote social justice and transform society. That’s why liberal judges are more likely to be judicial activists than are conservative judges. Most liberal judges don’t see their roles as merely adjudicating a dispute according to the law. They see their role as correcting society’s economic and social inequalities.

The same applies to many professors and high school teachers as well, outside of the natural sciences and math. According to some liberals, teachers in the liberal arts should use their classroom to produce young people who wish to engage in society-transforming work. And even the natural sciences are slowly moving in the same direction

Conservatives would say that a reporter should report, a judge should render a just verdict, and a professor’s task is to teach – all without an agenda.

Why Do They Act Like That?

Compassion – Liberals are said to rule from a reference point of compassion, not principle. Conservatives contend they themselves have a higher regard for historical principle, whatever the issue. Liberals would counter that compassion is in itself one of the very highest principles.

Laws vs. Morality – There is evidence that one of the most important differences between the Left and Right is their attitudes toward law. Before reading the source material I would not have pieced this theory together. According to one theory, the Left thinks legally and the Right thinks

morally. In fact, one prominent conservative writer says that too often the Left and secularists venerate, if not worship, law. They put their faith in law – both national and (especially?) international law.

Consider the war in Iraq. The Left's chief argument against the war, before it began, was that without U.N. sanction, attacking Iraq violated international law. At that point, for most of those on the Left, the rightness or wrongness of toppling Saddam Hussein's regime was determined by their definition of its legality – i.e. Was it authorized by the U.N. Security Council? International law thus provides a clear example of the Left/Right divide. To the Left, international sanction is the major determinate for rightness or wrongness. To the Right, an action is good or bad irrespective of the votes of the world's nations. They judge it by a code of morality different from international law. I wouldn't have expected that analysis or conclusion.

Citing another contemporary example, the Left throughout the world opposed Israel's 1981 air strike razing Saddam Hussein's nuclear reactor, thereby destroying his ability to manufacture nuclear weapons. Among major American newspapers, only the conservative Wall Street Journal supported the strike. There was massive liberal outrage as to Israel's violation of international law. It seemed to be unimportant to liberals that the action destroyed a nuclear weapons facility of the world's leading mass murderer. All that mattered was international law or sanctions – legality, under international standards, mattered most. For many conservatives, what mattered most was their opinion of the morality of the act.

One conservative theory is that the Left, which is largely secular, regards morality not as absolute, but as relative. If so, this inevitably leads to moral confusion and no one likes to be morally confused. So instead of moral absolutes, the Left holds legal absolutes. The Left is accused of lacking the self-control apparatus of a religion, and as a result wants to pass more and more laws which control people - so say some on the Right. This is an attempt to understand the Left's alleged preoccupation with controlling courts, passing laws, filing lawsuits, and naming judges. Notice the similarity to the discussion about moral relativism elsewhere in this report.

Political Correctness – Conservatives are concerned that the traditional values of “freedom” and “truth” have been diminished at the altar of political correctness (PC). If so, the growth of PC is also related to another concept previously discussed – good intentions being the important thing, without regard for the result. Therefore, the overall righteousness of a goal is more important than the absolute truth. A conservative might even complain that the combination of political correctness and multiculturalism is the scourge of patriotism.

Age and Maturity – There is research that indicates as people age they are more likely to identify themselves as conservative, or at least “becoming less liberal”. Does it necessarily follow that adopting more conservative values and principles is a sign of maturity? While I believe older is consistent with conservative, I wouldn't presume it implies more maturity.....or would I?

Who's the Victim?

Liberals are accused by conservatives of prolonging an unneeded affirmative action program, particularly at universities. Conservatives cite evidence that its continuation hurts minorities

more than it helps. Concern for educational opportunities for minorities and society's other victims certainly endures more with liberals than conservatives.

Here is an example of two very different reactions and explanations regarding the same event. It's based on actual observations. The issue is how to appropriately deal with graffiti vandals. Reactions to this problem by the cultural Left generally ranged from support to indifference. Some on the Left have described graffiti as "urban art" and the vandals as "artists". Liberals generally regard graffiti in far less negative ways than do conservatives. One reason for this is that for many on the Left it is difficult to condemn the poor and minorities. And, one theory I found believes that conservatives tend to view our civilization as more fragile than the left views it. Conservatives are more paranoid perhaps. It seems that to the conservative, graffiti is an assault on civilization; to the liberal, graffiti is the result of civilization's assault on those who paint the graffiti. On the Right, society is viewed and the vandal's victim; on the Left, the vandal is viewed as society's victim.

Who's The Enemy?

Conservatives sometimes feel that the Left has actually abandoned the "war against evil". I prefer to think that the Left has simply redefined their concept of evil. I believe the liberal concept of good and evil has changed in the wake of new concepts – particularly moral equivalence and moral relativism. What was once a group that led the resistance to communism and other cruel totalitarian regimes, has become isolationist and apply a moral equivalency measurement to other cultures. What was once a group that was staunchly law and order has become much more "understanding" of the underprivileged "societal victims" who more often commit crimes.

Perhaps, as one prominent conservative postulates, human evil in the world is so great that many liberals chose to either ignore it, or to focus their concerns elsewhere. One of the main evils which the Left fights against is "inequality" as they define it. Another "new evil" is carbon dioxide emission which liberals have stated as being a greater evil and more of a threat than any human evil, such as cruel totalitarian cultures. Whatever the reason, I believe conservatives tend to be more practical and protective about what they consider as evil. As a result, they tend to recognize what they perceive as evilness in the world more quickly than do liberals. Liberals are more idealistic and seem to exhibit more naiveté about the conservatives' concept of evil.

In any case, the Right and Left have very different definitions of what constitutes good and evil.

Karl Who?

We have heard that "9/11" was the result of a group of men reacting to their situation in their homelands and the world economy. Even though these individuals came primarily from wealthy homes, we still hear a very different story. Liberals contend that "9/11" was the result of international repression and poverty. There is a liberal mantra that "poverty, repression, and imperialism is the cause of international crime" and that it has manifested itself in an international uprising against the U.S. and its allies. Could this be true? As Barack Obama stated during his campaign: "In Europe, the view that America is part of what has gone wrong in

our world, rather than a force to help make it right, has become all too common”. Conservatives would agree with this statement, but would have gone on to tell those in Europe how wrong such a perception is.

It seems that some on the Left believe that the situation these young Muslim men found themselves in actually caused their actions. And the concept of “bitterness” surfaced in Barack Obama’s campaign. He suggested that it causes Americans to cling to guns and religion because of frustration with economic and social conditions. It can be inferred from that that people need to find something to assist them in achieving a measure of contentment and an ability to “cope”. Compare this to Karl Marx’s proclamation: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of a soulless condition. It is the opium of the people.” One of Marx’s central themes was that one’s economic status or circumstance determines beliefs and actions.

What Do They Think About Each Other?

A recent survey conducted by the University of Michigan’s American National Election Studies gives some indication of what liberals and conservatives think about each other. On a scale of 0 (absolutely the worst possible) to 100 (Mount Rushmore adoration), both groups were asked to rate each other. Those who described themselves as “conservative” or “extremely conservative” gave liberals an average score of 39. Those describing themselves as “liberal” or “extremely liberal” gave conservatives a similar score – 38.

In the 1998 poll, when asked to apply the scale to then-President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore, “extreme conservatives” gave them both a rating of 45. In the most recent poll, when “extreme liberals” were asked to apply the same scale to President Bush and Vice President Cheney, the result was a score of 15 and 16 respectively. And 60 percent of these “extreme liberals” gave them both a score of “0”. In other words, six out of ten Americans on the far left found that no evil, heinous person in the world could be worthy of more hatred than Bush and Cheney. For a little perspective, the “then-alive” Saddam Hussein received an average score of 8 from all Americans. This seems to indicate that liberals are harder on conservatives than the reverse.

While I find the previous information surprising, it is consistent with other studies about the tone and terminology used when describing each other. When describing conservatives, liberals often use the adjectives “evil” (from Bill Clinton and Howard Dean), “Reichstag-like” (from John Dingell), “supremacist” (from George Soros), “dunce” (referring to President Reagan) or “dumb as a stump” (referring to George Bush and “bad people”). One researcher found that conservatives tend to use negative but less emotionally charged adjectives such as “dangerous”, “confused”, “misdirected”, “well intentioned”, “naïve”, “scary” and “wrong”.

Some of liberals’ most emotionally charged words are, according to critics, conveniently undefined – e.g. social justice, living wage, price gouging, or fragile environment. The following are terms liberals are accused of applying to virtually every idea or action with which they differ: racist, sexist, homophobic, islamophobic, imperialist, bigoted, intolerant, and xenophobic. Liberals have been accused of using these words to attack the motives of non-

liberals and thereby morally dismiss the non-liberal person. Some of these words make it easy to be a liberal – with further deep thought being unnecessary. They know they oppose racism, imperialism and bigotry, and that they are for peace, tolerance and the environment. These words make liberals feel good – by opposing conservative ideas and policies, they are automatically opposing racism, bigotry, imperialism, etc. Conversely, here is a list of one-word descriptions of what liberals support: peace, fairness, tolerance, poor, disenfranchised, and the environment.

While I am hesitant to buy into all of the above conservative arguments, I find the term “phobic” very interesting. It seems to be used as a liberal dismissal of ideological opponents. It combines instant moral dismissal with instant psychological analysis. If you do not support society redefining marriage you are “homophobic”, and further discussion or thought is unnecessary. If you seek to retain English as America’s unifying language, you are not only “racist”, you are, as New York Times editorial describes you, “xenophobic” and, a new term, “Latinophobic”.

A published report in “Psychological Bulletin” described conservatism as a psychological disorder characterized by: fear, aggression, dogmatism, intolerance of ambiguity, uncertainty avoidance They need “cognitive disclosure” and “terror management”. Ouch! That isn’t polite criticism intended to invite debate on the merits.

Are Conservatives Selfish “Pr....ks”?

It’s a central dogma of the Left that conservatives are inherently selfish. Stingy, unfeeling and selfish are common terms used for decades by the Left to describe the Right. There has been legitimate research done to address this question – at least as it regards charitable contributions and volunteerism. The largest project was taken on by Arthur C. Brooks, a Syracuse University Professor of public administration.

The study found that four forces are primarily responsible for making people charitable: religion, skepticism about government involvement in their economic life, strong families, and personal entrepreneurship. It concludes that, very generally, these determining forces are in sync with political conservatives and have “reverse polarity” relative to political liberals.

These determining forces act upon the political spectrum with the following results, according to the study:

- Conservative families give 30 percent more in absolute dollars than liberal families even though (and here I was surprised) liberal families earned six percent more than conservative families. Registered Republicans are more likely than Democrats to give at all – 90 to 83 percent.
- Conservative Americans also donate more of their time to charities than liberals.
- Religious Americans are more charitable than non-religious Americans irrespective of their politics.
- The more liberal you are, particularly for the secular Left, the less likely you are to donate your money or time to charity. The secular conservatives, a very small group, also ranked very low in their charitable giving – again the correlation to religion. The

churchgoer is nearly twice as likely as the secularist to give money to charities in a given year. And the amount given is an unbelievable multiple of 100 times higher than the secularist.

- Examining income categories, poorest Americans give the highest percentage of their income to charity, second is the wealthy, and last is the middle class.
- If liberals and moderates gave blood at the same rate as conservatives, the blood supply of the U.S. would jump about 45 percent
- The least charitable of all groups measured were young liberals – as regards money, time or blood – so much for the much exalted young idealism.
- Comparing the U.S. charitable giving to western Europe, differences are huge. The report states that the reason lies in European attitudes toward God and state. Europeans have largely turned their backs on the former and consider the latter the answer to everything.

Professor Brooks admits that his findings were the opposite of what he expected – so much so that he actually checked the results to make sure there were no mistakes.

Are Liberals as Happy as They Look?

Considerable research has been done as to which of the political extremes is most happy and fulfilled. Not surprisingly, the Left and Right have different visions of what it means to have or achieve happiness – and how the state fits into the process.

A study by the Pew Research Center in 2006 found that 47 percent of conservative Republicans in the U.S. described themselves as “very happy”, while only 28 percent of liberal Democrats indicated such cheer. Not to be outdone, another study had to check it out and at least attempt to explain this unexpected result. The study, published in the June 2008 issue of the journal *Psychological Science*, surprisingly confirmed the 2006 study’s conclusion. But they stated that conservatives also scored highest on measures of rationalization, which gauge a person’s tendency to justify, or explain away, inequalities. They state that if your beliefs don’t justify gaps in status, you could be left frustrated and disheartened. The researchers write: “Our research suggests that inequality takes a greater psychological toll on liberals than on conservatives, apparently because liberals lack ideological rationalizations that would help them frame inequality in a positive (or at least neutral) light”. Does that explain it? Recall the discussion of what is perceived as unequal earlier in this report. There it was pointed out that research indicates that liberals often infer that opportunities are unequal merely from the existence of unequal outcomes – even when opportunities are equal. This debate is something like “Point/Counterpoint” in an unending loop – and it’s far from over.

Syracuse University Professor Arthur C. Brooks (refer to the “charitable giving” discussion presented earlier) did comprehensive research on happiness of Americans. First of all, Professor Brooks found that conservatives emphasize more traditional values than do liberals – e.g. marriage, family, freedom, and hard work. As with his earlier research, there were many surprises:

- 44 percent of conservatives described themselves as happy. That compared to just 25 percent of all liberals. This “happiness gap” has maintained itself to some degree over 35 years of polling.
- Conservatives are more likely than liberals to go to church or synagogue regularly – 46 to 16 percent.
- Religious people are more likely to describe themselves as happy than secularists.
- Conservatives are twice as likely to be churchgoing as liberals.
- When religious and political differences are combined, the results are striking. Secular liberals are as likely to say they are “not too happy” as to say they are “very happy” – each at 22 percent. Religious conservatives are ten times more likely to report being very happy than not too happy – 50 to 5 percent.
- Interestingly, when the groups are narrowed to what is described as “hard-core” liberals and conservatives, it was found that both categories were among the happiest in the study.
- Income has virtually no effect on happiness.
- Two thirds of conservatives are married, compared with one third for liberals.
- Married people are twice as likely as singles to say they’re happy.
- Parents are more likely to be happy than non-parents.
- Married people are the happiest of all.
- Conservatives are more optimistic than liberals. Perhaps, as was pointed out in the earlier study discussed in this section, liberals are indeed affected by their focus on the perceived injustices of our system.

End of Unity? Or Maybe Not?

Until recently it was easy for me to reach the conclusion that, while the U.S. is politically polarized, there was still one America. I believed Americans had a fairly consistent vision of what the country should be, and were just having a healthy debate about how to get there. I now have doubts. Not only do we have two very different views of who America is, we also have two very different visions of where we should go and what we should be as a country. I believe that the Right wants an America very different in substance than the one desired by the Left. I also believe most on both sides are sincere in their beliefs and want America to be the best that it can be.

There are several theories that try to look through the current differences and point to several trends that could eventually bring us closer together. Here are some conservatives’ observations about why the two groups might converge philosophically in the future:

- First is the “wealth effect” as suggested by conservative organizer Grover Norquist. The ever-increasing number of Americans who own equity interests in U.S. and international businesses argues against an ever-widening separation of the top and bottom economic strata. There is evidence that the “rich, richer/poor poorer” argument is mostly a myth. This points to a potential for the Left to become more “in tune” with the Right – perhaps sometime.
- Another trend is the ever weakening power of the labor unions. This could have the effect of weakening the Left – maybe eventually.
- Conservative media’s rise may improve the Right’s influence – maybe eventually.

- The liberal influence at colleges and universities couldn't get stronger, so there is only one direction for change to occur – to the Right – but in the distant future.
- The growth of home schooling, now up to a surprising 4 percent of school age children, bodes well for conservatives – but the children must first get older.
- Some believe American Catholics are trending toward more conservative positions. And the growing percentage of other conservative groups such as the Mormon population could have an effect – but only well into the future.
- And the meteoric growth of the American Hispanic population in all likelihood will continue. I was surprised to find that Hispanics are considered by many to be a conservative group. Maybe so, as long as the conservatives don't continue to “blow it” with this group as they have done in the past. But it all takes time!

The above are clearly conservative opinions – perhaps with some basis in fact. But some would say they are just “grasping at straws”. There is a totally different list that would give encouragement to liberals. But it's just too soon to tell if there will be movement one way or the other – things need to “shake out first”. It seems to me that calls for unity among Americans that totally or quickly transcends Left and Right, may be either naïve or disingenuous. We can all come together eventually, but have we now reached the point that true unity will exist only when one group prevails over the other? I think the Left thinks so. Most on the Right probably do not. So who's right?