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Liberalism and Conservatism: The Engine and Caboose of the Train to Perdition

Hope and change! Forward! Get with the times! But which direction is forward, and which “times” shall we get with? Too often the latter might as well now mean the *New York Times*, but glossed over is that people change the times; the times do not change the people. So, translated, the admonition to “Get with the times” really means “Go with the herd.” And often overlooked is whether that herd is heading for greener pastures or the slaughterhouse.

This brings us to the matter of liberalism and conservatism, the two, supposedly, dominant and opposing ideologies of our time. But what if, as much as being in opposition, they’re also two sides of the same coin? What if they are not so much ideologies as they are *processes*? And what if these processes ensure the destruction of civilization?

Let us begin by analyzing what these two “isms” actually are. Oh, everyone has his own definition of conservatism, with neoconservatives, paleoconservatives, “crunchy conservatives,” fiscal conservatives, social conservatives, and others all claiming real-McCoy status. And considering other places and the past paints an even more confusing picture. In the 1950s United States, a conservative *was* staunchly anti-communist, à la Joe McCarthy. But at the same time in the Soviet Union, a conservative was a communist; a liberal in that evil empire was someone who sought the Marxist state’s reform. Of course, many will counter that such application of this terminology is the work of media liberals and is much like calling Iran’s Muslim theocracy conservative (which is also done). Yet the entire Western political world bears witness to “conservatism’s” ever-shifting and unidentifiable boundaries. Western European conservatives are akin to our liberals, a good example being ex-prime minister of Britain David Cameron, who was “proud” of his nation’s 2014 acceptance of faux marriage and is tolerant of abortion; he and other Euro-cons also accept socialized medicine and statism in general. Moreover, even the headline-making, anti-establishment figures such as France’s Marine Le Pen and Holland’s Geert Wilders are socially quite “liberal” and distinguish themselves mainly by striking a nationalist, anti-Muslim-immigration tone. This, mind you, also epitomizes Donald Trump. I dubbed him our first “European-conservative” presidential candidate in January, and the *Russian Times* echoed this just over a month later in stating that he desired an “‘American-first’ version of European nationalism.” No doubt. And as our country drifts away from its Christian foundation and becomes more like über-secular Western Europe, our prominent “conservatives” start to resemble Western Europe’s variant of “conservatism,” and our battles, its battles.

The same, of course, applies to “liberalism.” Its policy proposals change from time to time and place to place, with, for example, yesterday’s liberals (rightfully) opposing laws against mixed-race marriage and today’s liberals (wrongly) advocating laws recognizing mixed-up “marriage” (the same-sex pseudo-variety).

So how can all these manifold, shape-shifting conceptions of “liberalism” and “conservatism” be reconciled? Simply by accepting the terms’ only consistent definitions:

Conservatism involves the desire to “conserve” the status quo.

Liberalism involves the desire to change the status quo.



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Thus, as the status quo changes, so do the provisional positions of the day's liberals and conservatives. This has been recognized early and often. Just considering conservatism, British historian Keith Feiling expressed approximately a century ago that it "is not so much a fixed programme as a continuing spirit" (as paraphrased by Professor F.J.C. Hearnshaw). Political theorist Russell Kirk wrote, "Strictly speaking, conservatism is not a political system, but rather a way of looking at the civil order. The conservative of Peru ... will differ greatly from those of Australia, for though they may share a preference for things established, the institutions and customs which they desire to preserve are not identical." And as WorldNetDaily.com founder Joseph Farah put it in his 2002 piece "WHY I'M NOT A CONSERVATIVE," conservatives merely "seek to conserve something from the past — institutions, cultural mores, values, political beliefs, traditions." Thus, while Kirk described conservatism as an "anti-ideology," it perhaps is better described as a process — of, again, aiming to preserve the status quo. And liberalism is that *process* of trying to change it. But what happens when, as Farah put it, people "are forever on the defensive" and act as if "a victory is holding back attacks on liberty or minimizing them"?

Compromising Our Way to Perdition

Wars are not won by being defensive; the side that wins territory is the side that seeks it, not the side that merely compromises on what is sought. But what ever and always happens in liberal-conservative confrontations? The liberals come to the bargaining table demanding a change. As for the conservatives, it's as if they embrace the philosophy the opportunistic leper espoused in the film *Braveheart*: "It is exactly the ability to compromise that makes a man noble." Oh, in many cases conservatives are just nice guys willing to meet the other side halfway, but, as is said, "Nice guys finish last." And it doesn't matter if liberals are met halfway or given 30 percent, 20, or even just five percent of what they demand during a given negotiation. For they will be back, next month, next year, or sometime later, again and again, asking for more of the same change like a spoiled child who'll never take "no" for an answer. And they'll get a crumb here, a bite there, and a slice somewhere else until they have the whole loaf.

As an example, when liberals started agitating for faux marriage, many conservatives offered "civil unions" as a middle ground. It was always obvious to keen observers, however, that the homosexuality lobby would never be satisfied with these thrown crumbs and would be back for more — and they got more. And all the while, as I pointed out in "The Slippery Slope to Pedophilia" (*The New American*, October 7, 2013), a liberal vanguard was already working to legitimize pedophilia (and bestiality, for that matter), using the *same arguments* the homosexuality lobby introduced decades ago.

As for faux marriage, though, it's not just that usurpative social engineers posing as judges ruled for it, most notably in the Supreme Court's 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision; it's that conservative governors and other politicians rolled over, again accepting the *status quo* of judicial supremacy (extra-constitutional though it is) and proclaiming faux marriage "the law of the land," thus accepting the related *status quo* that confuses rulings with law. For abiding by the status quo is what conservatives do — even when that status quo is a logical no-go.

Of course, "Politics is the art of the possible," observed Otto von Bismarck, and politics is downstream of culture. Given this, many could rhetorically ask: With American opinion on faux marriage shifting from 57 percent opposed and 35 percent for in 2001 to 55 percent for and only 37 percent opposed in



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2016 (Pew Research Center, May 12, 2016), what really is possible politically? Yet this is the point. Not only are ever more rank-and-file conservatives accepting faux marriage, but they are simply too defensive and disengaged to win culture wars. They like to live and let live, which is why, as Farah put it, “Conservatives, from my experience, do not make good freedom fighters.... It takes a radical agenda to defeat a radical agenda. Conservatives have no stomach for fighting — the kind of fighting it takes to restore real freedom to America” — and the morality that is its foundation.

This real fight is, again, in the cultural (and philosophical/spiritual) realm. Sure, conservatives have a greater sense of duty and may be more likely to vote than liberals. Ultimately, though, as much as being causes elections are results — the results of past-to-present cultural change that determines whether a George Washington, a Hillary Clinton, or an Adolf Hitler can rise to power. Elections just make social change official.

And why are conservatives too often missing in action on the cultural battlefield? One reason was well explained by philosopher G.K. Chesterton, who wrote, “All conservatism is based upon the idea that if you leave things alone you leave them as they are. But you do not. If you leave a thing alone you leave it to a torrent of change.” And is this not a rule of life? If you leave a car or house alone, sitting, it doesn’t remain pristine but degenerates into dilapidation. Civilization is no different. Maintenance involves the application of energy — and raising up a land fallen from grace requires nova-like proactivity.

Yet it’s not just that conservatives are defensive, but that they often mistake holding actions for headway. Back when the people of one state after another were voting against faux-marriage recognition, I remember conservative pundits proclaiming the rejections a resounding victory for their “ism.” They missed the point. Consider: What if activists repeatedly proposed repealing the 13th Amendment and reinstating slavery? If the measures were voted down but the slavery movement continued its agitation unabated, would you consider this a great victory for abolitionism? Or would you conclude that the rearing of this once-settled issue’s ugly head suggested a twisted and troubling cultural shift? If we not only weren’t even talking about faux marriage but also succeeded in, let’s say, convincing great numbers of citizens that marriage is an exclusively sacramental religious institution and that government shouldn’t be involved, that *would* be a true victory; marriage would have not have been debased but restored. Once the barbarians have reached and are repeatedly assailing your political gates, you’re far closer to vanquishment than victory.

But this is simply not how conservatives instinctively view matters. Rather, conservatism can be likened to a defensively magnificent young boxer — who never throws punches. After a particularly intense bout, he emerges from the ring, bruised and battered, with a blackened and cut eye, bloody lip, and broken nose. He then holds up his arms, and with a broad smile displaying two more missing teeth says, “Look, dad, this is my greatest victory ever! I blocked 90 percent of the punches today!”

Now, I realize I could end up a bruised and battered writer, as this is a sensitive subject and many good people identify as “conservative.” If you’re reading this and take offense, however, know that it probably doesn’t apply to you. Ask yourself, am I really a “conservative”? You’re not if you’re a constitutionalist, as constitutionalism isn’t even remotely close to today’s statist status quo. “Was George Washington a conservative?” Farah asked. “No. He was a revolutionary.” If you yearn to restore the constitutional republic of the Founding Fathers’ dreams, you, like they, are not a conservative. You’re a rebel.



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The Engine and Caboose of Cultural Change

So what is the real relationship between liberalism and conservatism? It can be conceptualized thus: The liberal change agents are like a train engine, pulling along the caboose of conservatives. Oh, sometimes the engine is more powerful or less so, the caboose lighter or heavier, providing more or less resistance, so the progress toward what is actually a precipice may be faster or slower. But the direction never changes. This movement is continual, if not continuous, yet the day's conservatives always tend to like where they find themselves and will defend that position, though not very well. Late conservative icon William F. Buckley famously wrote that the conservative is someone who "stands athwart history, yelling Stop." But the conservative is seldom more than a stop light, destined to turn green if one waits out the red, that emotion which inevitably wanes.

And what are conservatives defending, anyway? To quote Chesterton again, writing in the April 19, 1924 edition of the *Illustrated London News*, "The whole modern world has divided itself into Conservatives and Progressives. The business of Progressives is to go on making mistakes. The business of Conservatives is to prevent mistakes from being corrected." He continued, "Even when the revolutionist might himself repent of his revolution, the traditionalist is already defending it as part of his tradition. Thus we have two great types — the advanced person who rushes us into ruin, and the retrospective person who admires the ruins." Does this not help explain how Republicans, as many frustratingly complain, get elected and then do nothing to change the political culture in Washington, D.C.? Moreover, it explains why, while yesterday's conservatives fought the acceptance of cohabitation, today's may roll their eyes at the "Church Lady types" who'd bat an eye at it. And when I discouraged the use of the term capitalism — as its modern usage was the handiwork of socialists endeavoring to discredit economic freedom — conservatives bristled, married to the word as they are. Of course, were the media, entertainment, and academia to adopt "economic freedom" as their term of choice, in a generation or so the new conservatives would parrot it reliably.

In other words, liberals and conservatives, while in opposition at any given moment, are over time two sides of the same coin. For who authored today's status quo? The people who changed yesterday's status quo: yesterday's liberals. This means that today's conservatives are merely defending yesterday's liberals' social and political victories. Moreover and more strikingly, the lib-con relationship is so interrelated that if liberals didn't have conservatives, they'd have to invent them. And in a sense, they do. For when liberals effect changes so thoroughly that they become the status quo, do these "liberals" not become the new conservatives? As Chesterton put it, "The Liberal Party suddenly becomes the Conservative Party the instant it has anything to conserve." This explains the common observations, "The Republicans are just like the Democrats of 30 years ago" and "John F. Kennedy would be considered a conservative if alive today." Is that standing "athwart history, yelling Stop"? If anything, conservatives stand athwart current events.

Reasons for Wrong Divisions

So why has the whole modern world "divided itself into Conservatives and Progressives"? And it certainly is a modern phenomenon. The political senses of "conservative" and "liberal" (and the socio-political sense of "progressive" meaning "radically liberal") didn't originate until the 19th century. People prior to then, especially in Christendom, defined matters more sanely: There simply was Truth — a transcendent standard of right and wrong existing apart from man — and everything else.



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This could be described as orthodoxy and heterodoxy or, to use a now unfashionable term, heresy. And it was a universal, with Catholics, Protestants, and even pagans before them stressing the matter (for example, Luther, Calvin, and Plato all strenuously emphasized the imperative of upholding orthodoxy). Of course, the conception of Truth may vary, with the believing Catholic, Methodist, Anabaptist, Salafist Muslim, and Jew all having different visions. But while it always matters how close to actual Truth a conception of it may be, the basic point here is this: A person with a deep belief in Truth won't change with political and cultural winds, as he is rooted to a fixed point. Such a person not only will generally refuse to "conform to the world" but will often derive peace, contentment, and the strength associated with the conviction that right makes might from his walk with God. And although people of this stripe did and do disagree on particulars, they did and do agree on the existence of absolute Truth.

Today, though, the spirit of Pontius Pilate's cynical question "What is truth?" is status quo. A 2002 Barna Group study found that most Americans don't believe in Truth and instead consider morals "relative" — thus are most likely to make moral decisions based on "feelings" — and that only six percent of teenagers (who today are adults) believe in Truth. So the Protagorean pronouncement "Man is the measure of all things," considered in the ancient Greek world fringe and fanciful, has come to flower as basic assumption in a materialistic West.

And without perceiving Truth, with nothing beyond man to use as a yardstick, we're reduced to measuring ourselves relative to other men. Then what happens? We look at the "political spectrum," which comprises people, and the "average" opinion (or what the pseudo-elites convince us it is) becomes the perceived center, supplanting the true center, Truth. We furthermore assign labels to deviation from it; in our case we call its "right" side conservative and its "left" liberal. Of course, where being aligned with the true center (God's will) was once considered praiseworthy, now people may boast of being a "moderate" Democrat or Republican. And should you venture too far from the spectrum's center, which is far from the Eternal Center, you're labeled a "radical," an "extremist," or worse. This is the modern version of a heresy charge, one inspiring calls to imprison climate-change realists and leading to career destruction for the politically incorrect.

Then there is the phenomenon that greases the skids for our precipice-bound train: the worship of change. Change is to be a means to an end, but moderns often treat it as an end unto itself. This also is a function of relativism. When believing in that which is perfect and doesn't change, Truth, it becomes our focus. We then aren't put off by grandpa, not to mention ancients millennia ago, having hewed to it; we'd expect no less, as the Truth and the obligation to embrace it are the same in every age. In our relativistic universe, however, something can be tried but not truly "true." And given that nothing feels as good and proper as what we've grown up with and accustomed to, we descend into an intense chronological chauvinism (it's easy for people to consider their time superior, anyway). Then truths' status as long-held becomes liability and not testimonial, as we subordinate the eternal to the ephemeral — to fashions. It's not, "Wow, there just may be good reason why this idea has endured long enough to grow 'old,'" but, "That's so yesterday, so old-fashioned! Get with the times, boy!" Philosopher C.S. Lewis wrote of this change obsession in his book *The Screwtape Letters*, presented from the perspective of a demon trying to corrupt man:

The horror of the Same Old Thing is one of the most valuable passions we have produced in the human heart — an endless source of heresies in religion, folly in counsel, infidelity in marriage, and inconstancy in friendship. The humans live in time, and experience reality successively. To experience



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much of it, therefore, they must experience many different things; in other words, they must experience change. And since they need change, the Enemy [God] (being a hedonist at heart) has made change pleasurable to them, just as He has made eating Pleasurable. But since He does not wish them to make change, any more than eating, an end in itself, He has balanced the love of change in them by a love of permanence.... Now just as we pick out and exaggerate the pleasure of eating to produce gluttony, so we pick out this natural pleasantness of change and twist it into a demand for absolute novelty.

Lewis goes on to say that God wants people “to ask very simple questions; is it righteous? Is it prudent? Is it possible? Now if we can keep men asking ‘Is it in accordance with the general movement [change] of our time? Is it progressive or reactionary [liberal or conservative]? Is this the way [change] that History is going?’ they will neglect the relevant questions” — the most relevant of which is, “Is it true?”

So we do need change — that which is the means to an important end: resurrecting the recognition that there really is just Truth, and everything else. “Liberalism” and “conservatism” (and most other “isms” for that matter) are phenomena of recent history, and they should be made history. This is a bitter pill to swallow for many good people, and most conservatives are good people. But what can we say about the modern period, the time of conservatism’s existence as one half of the dominant political paradigm? It’s also the period during which, as Joseph Farah noted, society moved “so far from righteous values and freedom principles that there is little left to conserve.” What kind of a track record is that? Would you continue a conservation program that left you with little clean water and arable land? If conservatism conserved little of value during the last hundred years, why should we think it will do better during the next hundred?

It’s time to stop conserving, poorly, yesterday’s liberals’ triumphs. It’s time to start being as offensive as liberals claim conservatives already are; this means not defending the position of constantly moving goal posts but reclaiming the timeless, unchanging moral and political principles that should govern the affairs of nations. It’s time to stand athwart conservatism, yelling “Stop.”



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