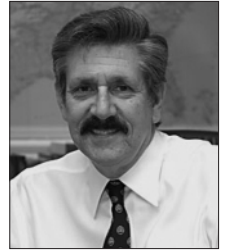


Still Neither Left Nor Right

BY RICHARD M. EBELING



We live in a time when virtually all political parties and candidates stand for the same fundamental ideological idea: state interventionism and compulsory redistribution. This also applies to the mainstream media. Even many who say they adhere to a “pro-market” view of things in fact turn out to be only more “moderate” advocates of government regulations and welfare-state programs.

This is why political labels have become even more meaningless than when the late Leonard E. Read, founder and long-time first president of FEE, penned his article “Neither Left Nor Right” 50 years ago this month in the first issue of *The Freeman* published under the auspices of the Foundation. (See page 28.)

Read pointed out that it was common practice in political discussions in the 1950s to refer to people on “the left” as socialists or communists, and to call those on “the right” fascists or Nazis. American liberals were considered “left-wingers” who were for bigger government and sympathetic to socialism, while conservatives were viewed as “right-wingers” who were “pro-big business” and against the “little man,” and therefore closet fascists.

As Read went on to explain, these distinctions were misplaced and irrelevant because both “left-wing” socialists and “right-wing” fascists were in fact merely two variations on the same collectivist theme. Both were devoted to government control of social and economic life, with only minor institutional differences between them.

(Marxian socialists advocated government nationalization and direct central planning of all production, while Italian fascists and German Nazis were for government regulation and planning of all property that

remained nominally private. In addition, Marxists spoke of an international workers’ revolution, in comparison to fascists and Nazis, who talked about nationalist and racial wars. Both socialists and fascists therefore believed that the world was divided into groups—classes, nations, races—that were inherently and inescapably in conflict with each other.)

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Hitler-type fascism is long a thing of the past. What we are left with in American politics are those who call themselves either “liberals” or “conservatives” and who claim to be ideologically miles apart from each other. But are they really so far apart? On “the left” the liberals say they are for civil liberties and personal freedom, but they continue to advocate government regulation of business, redistribution of wealth, and various forms of social engineering to manipulate human relationships and attitudes.

They never explain how personal freedom can be maintained and civil

liberties secured if the government imposes a thought police to enforce “politically correct” conduct and language, or if society is divided into racial, ethnic, and gender groups, some of whom will be given special “affirmative” favors and privileges at the expense of others. Nor can individual freedom be guaranteed when government taxes away the wealth of some to redistribute to others deemed more deserving because of ideological influence or political clout. Likewise, liberty has little meaning when government can seize people’s property, regulate their business and industry, and interfere with the peaceful and voluntary exchanges that free

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men agree on for their mutual betterment. “The left” in America still does not get it: freedom is an empty word if private property is not respected and if all human relationships are not based on consent.

On “the right” many conservatives still use the rhetoric of individual freedom and free enterprise, but beneath the surface it is clear that too often this is mere form without content. The mainstream conservative movement in the United States has given up all interest and willingness to oppose and abolish the interventionist welfare state. They have made their peace with the idea that Big Government is here to stay. They believe that the wider American public cannot be weaned from political paternalism; so they have set themselves the more “modest” goal of getting control of the political machinery in order, supposedly, to manage the welfare state more “cost-efficiently” and to use it to direct society in “better” and more “virtuous” directions.

Some 40 years ago conservatives used to tell their opponents on the left that “you cannot legislate morality.” Better conduct could only come, they would say, through improvements in the individual hearts of men and through the peaceful possibilities of voluntary association. Rarely is this heard anymore on the conservative “right.” Instead, too many conservatives now wish to use the government to socially engineer their fellow Americans, especially the young, through control of various “public” institutions.

The conservative battle cries focus on changing the curriculum in government-run schools and having taxpayers subsidize government “faith-based initiatives.” There is too frequently an appeal for “political leadership” to mold and influence the ethical character and conduct of the American people. In addition, government is to establish a new “national greatness” to which all Americans are expected to give their allegiance. These conservatives have apparently forgotten that no moral compass, virtuous conduct, or proper sense of community and citizenship can be fostered through political propaganda or government-school indoctrination. The sources of these virtues are family, friends, faith, and moral philosophy, and these can only fully flourish outside of the political process.

Thus in contemporary America the supposedly liberal “left” and the conservative “right” are really, for the most part, still two variations on the collectivist theme. Both wish to use the power of the government to manipulate the social environment. They may differ in their conceptions of the politically manufactured world they would like to see created, but both these wings of collectivism share the determination to use government coercion to produce the outcomes they desire.

Recasting of Human Nature Rejected

Just as when Leonard Read wrote his article, the true friends of freedom are neither left nor right, as these terms continue to be used today. Classical liberals reject the morality or the ability of politics to either recast human nature or to forcibly create a better world.

The classical liberal, or libertarian, considers the highest political good to be the freedom of the individual. The function of government in a free society is to secure everyone from the predatory conduct of others. The purpose of the law and the police is to see that everyone is protected in his life, liberty, and property. The cornerstone of the ethical society is that human relationships should be based on consent and mutual agreement. The free market is the natural arena of liberty, in which all associations are the result of free choice and no man may be forced into being a tool for another person’s purpose.

Society is not some giant chessboard, to use a metaphor of Adam Smith’s, on which the social engineer moves us about to suit his political pleasure. Instead, the civil society of free men is one in which we form associations with one another as we find them good, desirable, and beneficial.

The great political dichotomy, therefore, is between those who advocate force (often and perversely in the name of “good intentions” and “noble causes”) and those who value freedom (for the flowering of the individual and the fostering of a just and prosperous society). For this reason, the cause of liberty continues to transcend the erroneous distinction between “left” and “right.”

