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Postwar American Liberalism and the Welfare State

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POSTWAR AMERICAN LIBERALISM AND THE
WELFARE STATE

by

William J. Voegeli, Jr.

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of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Philosophy

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VITA

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INTRODUCTION

Though understood in various ways, American liberalism was sufficiently well-focused to have been the dominant viewpoint of American politics in the years following World War II. James Q. Wilson said that liberalism was America's "ruling philosophy" throughout this period.¹ Robert Booth Fowler examined the assertion, commonly made in the 1950s, that we had reached the end of ideology, and concluded that this belief reflected not the decline, but the pre-eminence, of liberalism. The vehemence which met a challenge to the prevailing orthodoxy, such as the 1964 Goldwater presidential campaign, hardly suggests a political order indifferent to ideology.²

The era of liberal hegemony is now clearly over, or it has at least been suspended indefinitely. Recent years have seen a series of electoral developments--George McGovern's landslide defeat in 1972, the passage of Proposition 13 and other tax cutting measures in the late 1970s, and

¹James Q. Wilson, "Liberalism and Purpose," Commentary May 1972, p. 74.

²Robert Booth Fowler, Believing Skeptics: American Political Intellectuals, 1945-1964 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978), pp. 291-294.

the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980--suggesting that there is scarcely any popular enthusiasm for adding on to the existing structure of liberal programs, and some sentiment for rescinding policies that have been in place for many years. A number of observers agree that American liberalism is confused and unable to explain itself. James Nuechterlein says that liberalism is suffering from a crisis, the existence and severity of which "almost no one on the political spectrum, including liberals, would dispute."³ Of American political attitudes in the mid-seventies, John Frederick Martin writes:

Most people, liberals included, considered the government incapable of solving social problems and were tired of its trying--tired of federal coercion, and tired of civil rights. They went on to new battles, so swiftly changing their views and so utterly dismissing liberal ideas that the liberals of the 1960s appeared, only ten years later, as curious relics of a distant past.⁴

By the end of the 1970s, liberals were on the defensive, responding to ideas generated by others rather than advancing new proposals based on their own principles. The Democratic alternative to Ronald Reagan's 1981 tax plan, for example, would have been slightly more beneficial to the "middle class,"

³James A. Nuechterlein, "The People vs. The Interests," Commentary, March 1975, pp. 66-67.

⁴John Frederick Martin, Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism: The Democratic Party, 1945-1976 (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1979), p. 243.

which the Democratic bill took to mean anyone earning \$50,000 a year or less--the ninety-fifth percentile in the American income distribution. And the Democratic proposals on depreciation and corporate taxes were considered the better deal by many businessmen.⁵ Many liberals seemed unsure whether their traditional agenda was even defensible. As the New Republic editorialized, "The voters' impression that the liberal regime of government is partly responsible for our present dilemma, and that liberals have little to say about how we should get out of it, is justified."⁶

The severity of liberalism's present distress makes it somewhat easier and a good deal more important to achieve a clear understanding of modern American liberalism. The role of liberalism in American politics in the immediate future is unclear: the possibilities include the continuing decline and sterility of liberalism, the return of traditional liberalism to a leading position in American politics, or some sort of reformulation of the liberal approach to government. To be prepared to understand these developments requires some sense of how American liberals understood the country's situation and their own during the years of their preeminence and subsequent decline. It may be also that

⁵Daniel Seligman, "The Search For a Liberal Agenda," Fortune, 24 August 1981, p. 63.

⁶"In Defense of Good Intentions,": New Republic, 13 December 1980, p. 5.

liberalism is somewhat easier to understand now that its premises are being reevaluated, and many thoughtful people feel an historical and intellectual remoteness from the liberalism of the fifties and sixties. This longer perspective should make the contours of liberalism easier to discern.

There is a small body of literature devoted to the analysis of modern American liberalism, including some works that make important contributions to understanding particular aspects of liberalism. None of these studies attempt the project here contemplated, however--the study of liberalism as a system of ideas about American public policy.

The best study of modern American liberalism is Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism by John Frederick Martin. Martin studies how the civil rights issue changed the politics of the Democratic Party from 1945 to 1976. He argues that while Franklin Roosevelt had placated Southern whites so all factions of the Democratic Party would support the New Deal, Harry Truman set the party on an irreversible course towards the full acceptance of all the claims of the civil rights movement. By the mid-sixties the Democrats had recognized that their coalition could no longer include Southern racists and blacks, and chose to reject the former--the only electoral votes Barry Goldwater won from outside Arizona came from the Deep South. At just the point when

liberal Democrats wanted to consider the problem of race solved and turn to the problem of poverty, the two came together in an explosive mixture. The efforts to help the blacks of the northern ghetto, whose problems made Jim Crow seem no less evil but much simpler, shattered the fragile consensus that had backed the liberal vision of racial and economic justice. Though their intentions were only decent, and their assessment of the nation's needs was plausible, liberals were run over by history, says Martin, and have yet to recover.

Where Martin concentrates on liberal politics, Theodore J. Lowi's study, The End of Liberalism, is about the governmental practice of liberalism.⁷ He finds its approach to be disordered and destructive: "Liberalism replaces planning with bargaining."⁸ Most of the legislation passed by Congress does not actually decide anything; instead, the legislature confers broad discretionary power on federal agencies and departments, who must then issue rules that accomodate the demands of an array of interest-groups. Lowi scores the sunny belief that pluralism can save us from political pain--the inclusion of all interested parties does not necessarily solve our problems, and the excessive faith in pluralism as a governing procedure may keep us from ever

⁷Theodore J. Lowi, The End of Liberalism: The Second Republic of the United States, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1979).

⁸Ibid., p. 68.

confronting our real political needs.

A third book covers another aspect of modern American liberalism. Beyond the New Deal, by Alonzo Hamby, examines the relationship between liberals and President Harry Truman.⁹ The years from 1945 through 1953 were crucial to American liberalism. Liberals had to define themselves without reference to Franklin Roosevelt, and there was a fight for the soul of the liberal movement between opponents and supporters of Truman's Cold War policies. Hamby's account of the emergence of "vital center liberalism" is detailed and comprehensive, though not deeply analytical.

James A. Nuechterlein has written several insightful essays on modern American liberalism. The most detailed is "Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and the Discontents of Postwar Liberalism," a study of Schlesinger's political writings as representative of the thought of modern American liberalism.¹⁰ This article is the scholarly work closest to this dissertation, though the subject matter is broader, focusing on liberalism's position on civil rights, macroeconomics, and foreign policy issues, as well as the welfare state, and narrower in the method, using just one source as an indicator

⁹Alonzo L. Hamby, Beyond the New Deal: Harry S Truman and American Liberalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973).

¹⁰James A. Nuechterlein, "Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and the Discontents of Postwar Liberalism," Review of Politics 39 (January 1977): 3-40.

of liberal thinking. According to Nuechterlein, Schlesinger began with a reasonably clear answer to liberalism's problem in the late 1940s: how to claim and defend the middle ground between Henry Wallace and the National Association of Manufacturers. But liberalism, as reflected in Schlesinger's writings, slowly unraveled when confronted with a prosperous consumer society, Vietnam, civil rights, urban riots, and white backlash. Nuechterlein's conclusion, that liberals wanted the best of several worlds, and were incapable of making necessary choices, is elaborated in his essays, "The People vs. The Interests," and "The Liberal World Confronts the Reagan Era."¹¹

Other intellectual histories constitute a helpful introduction to the dissertation. Some of these works are very general: these include The Politics of Affluence: Ideology in the United States since World War II, by James P. Young, and Believing Skeptics: American Political Intellectuals, 1945-1964, by Robert Booth Fowler. Both books are concerned with wider topics than American liberalism. The Evolution of Liberalism, by Harry K. Girvetz, attempts to establish the relationship between eighteenth and twentieth century liberalism, but is more scholarly and dispassionate

¹¹James A. Nuechterlein, "The People vs The Interests" Commentary, March 1975, pp. 66-73; James A. Nuechterlein, "The Liberal World Confronts the Reagan Era," American Spectator, February 1982, pp. 20-23.

in treating the former. The Decline of American Liberalism, by Arthur A. Ekirch, Jr., and Rendezvous with Destiny, by Eric Goldman, trace American liberalism from the nineteenth century through the New Deal, providing valuable historical grounding, but leaving off where the dissertation will begin.¹²

Those works concerned with liberalism in more recent years concentrate on the practice rather than the theory. Two important analyses of the Great Society are The Great Society: Lessons for the Future, edited by Robert M. Solow and Eli Ginzberg, and The Promise of Greatness, by Sar A. Levitan and Robert Taggart. These books carefully examine the formulation, funding, and implementation of the major social welfare programs of the sixties. Between the lines one can glean some insights into the ideology that justified these programs. Two other books speak at greater length, but less cautiously, about liberalism and the Great Society. They are On Fighting Poverty: Perspectives From Experience, edited by James L. Sundquist, and The Great Society Reader: The Failure of American Liberalism, edited by Marvin E. Gettleman and David Mermelstein. Finally, The Cost of Good

¹²James P. Young, The Politics of Affluence: Ideology in the United States Since World War II (San Francisco: Chandler, 1968); Fowler, Believing Skeptics; Harry K. Girvetz, The Evolution of Liberalism (London: Collier, 1963); Arthur A. Ekirch, Jr., The Decline of American Liberalism (New York: Atheneum, 1967); Eric F. Goldman, Rendezvous with Destiny (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952).

Intentions: New York City and the Liberal Experiment, 1960-1975, by Charles R. Morris, derives some important lessons about liberalism from its implementation in one major city.¹³

The other sort of writing about liberalism dispenses with the study of its history, in thought or action. Proceeding on the assumption that the content of the liberal program is sufficiently clear, these essays go on to examine some of its hidden implications. Joseph Cropsey's essay, "Liberalism and Conservatism," is the most notable of these. Cropsey argues that liberalism takes classical and Christian notions of virtue and charity, and tries to make them modern by applying them in an egalitarian and positivistic way, resulting in a political viewpoint that is theoretically confused but politically popular. Other good works in this vein would include: Peter Clecak, Crooked Paths: Reflections on Socialism, Conservatism, and the Welfare State; Arnold S. Kaufman, The Radical Liberal: New Man in American Politics; Christopher Lasch, The Agony of the American Left; David Stockman, "The Social Pork Barrel;" Michael Walzer, "In

¹³Eli Ginzberg and Robert M. Solow, ed., The Great Society: Lessons for the Future (New York: Basic Books, 1974); Sar A. Levitan and Robert Taggart, The Promise of Greatness (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976); James L. Sundquist, ed., On Fighting Poverty: Perspectives From Experience (New York: Basic Books, 1969); Marvin E. Gettleman and David Mermelstein, eds., The Great Society Reader: The Failure of American Liberalism (New York: Random House, 1967); Charles R. Morris, The Cost of Good Intentions: New York City and the Liberal Experiment, 1960-1975 (New York: Norton, 1980).

Defense of Equality;" Aaron Wildavsky, "Government and the People;" and James Q. Wilson, "Liberalism and Purpose."¹⁴

Helpful though this body of literature may be to the understanding of modern American liberalism, it leaves a gap which this dissertation will occupy, though not fill. Between critical works that do not examine the actual words and deeds of liberalism, and historical works that do not go beyond chronicling the evolution of liberalism, there is a need for a critical intellectual history of modern American liberalism, in which evaluation is tied directly to evidence of liberals' goals and perceptions.

To provide such an intellectual history requires carefully delimiting what will be studied and how. Liberalism addresses itself to all kinds of questions of public policy as well as, more broadly, social and cultural issues. A study of liberalism with respect to all these matters would be, if it were possible at all, a very long book indeed. In the interests of brevity and cohesion, this dissertation will

¹⁴Joseph Cropsey, "Conservatism and Liberalism," in Left, Right, and Center, ed. Robert A. Goldwin (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1967), pp. 42-59; Peter Clecak, Crooked Paths: Reflections on Socialism, Conservatism, and the Welfare State (New York: Harper and Row, 1977); Arnold S. Kaufman, The Radical Liberal: New Man in American Politics (New York: Atherton Press, 1968); Christopher Lasch, The Agony of the American Left (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969); David Stockman, "The Social Pork Barrel," Public Interest 39 (Spring 1975): 3-30; Michael Walzer, "In Defense of Equality," The New Conservatives: A Critique from the Left, ed. Lewis A. Coser and Irving Howe (New York: Quadrangle, 1974), pp. 107-123; Aaron Wildavsky, "Government and the People," Commentary, August 1973, pp 25-32; Wilson, "Liberalism and Purpose."

concentrate on the welfare state. It seems fair to regard liberalism as being most clearly distinguished by its attitude towards the welfare state. The liberal of 1945 probably would differ from the liberal of 1983 on U.S. foreign policy, or the management of the economy, or race relations. But it is a safe guess that both would feel that government, especially the federal government, should do more to help people secure adequate incomes, housing, health care and education. It is in the advocacy of the welfare state also that liberals have most clearly and consistently differed with their conservative opposition. To study liberalism with respect to the welfare state, then, is to study it with respect to the one issue that can best reveal the character of modern liberalism.

The selection of the best sources to use for a study of liberalism is even more important and difficult than the selection of a topic around which to organize such a study. American liberalism is far from being a tightly organized body of opinion, and there is nothing resembling an official liberal spokesman. In view of the width and variety of American liberalism, a comprehensive history of it is probably impossible: to include every source that any student of the subject might regard as reflecting liberalism would be to include many sources that many knowledgeable authorities regard as unrelated to liberalism. This dissertation will rely on some of the sources most widely and plausibly

regarded as having articulated mainstream liberal ideas. The political writings of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. are one source we will rely on as indicative of liberal thought. Schlesinger has been called a "weather vane of which way the wind is blowing in liberal circles," and "perhaps the most representative figure of mid-twentieth century liberalism...."¹⁵ His "enormous journalistic output, both learned and popular" covers the period from 1945, and reflects how liberalism reacted to and affected postwar America.¹⁶ A second and third source will be the magazines, Nation and New Republic. Robert Lekachman relied on these two sources when writing an informal history of postwar liberalism, as did Hamby in his book on Truman and liberals.¹⁷ Though the Americans for Democratic Action has been more concerned with realizing than clarifying the liberal agenda, its published and archival material provides some additional insights into liberal thinking since 1945. Though never powerful in its own right, the ADA reflected "vital center" liberalism better than any other organization.¹⁸

¹⁵ John Rosenberg, "If FDR Were Alive Today..." Nation, 15 April 1978, p. 420; Henry Fairlie, review of Robert Kennedy and His Times, by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., New Republic, 9 September 1978, p. 30.

¹⁶ John Taft, "The Once and Future Mandarin," New Republic, 26 November 1977, p. 18.

¹⁷ Robert Lekachman, "Fashions in Liberalism," Nation, 20 September 1965, pp. 62-66; Hamby, p. 603.

¹⁸ Hamby, p. 508.

An interpretation of the writings of just one man will always be open to doubts: has too much emphasis been given to one unrepresentative article, or a false connection been drawn between two very different works? These problems are much greater when the body of writing to be examined includes thirty-five years' publication of two weekly journals, involving several editors, dozens of editorialists, and hundreds of authors of reviews and articles. Yet the greater magnitude of the problem does not change its nature; the interpreter must still attempt to read his material carefully, thoroughly, and with an open mind, drawing the most plausible conclusions he can, knowing that equally judicious readers may arrive at different interpretations. This dissertation must, and will endeavor to, be particularly careful about assuming a single purpose or viewpoint is shared by the many thinkers to be examined, the sort of assumption that is usually safe in the study of a single author. On the other hand, our familiarity with the subject matter of this dissertation makes it easier to assess its conclusions than those of intellectual histories treating more remote or obscure subjects. Our common sense knowledge of modern liberalism is not a perfect standard for assessing scholarly interpretations of the subject--if it were, scholarly interpretations would be unnecessary--but it does provide a useful way to guard against strained or slanted readings of liberals' opinions.

The selection of 1945 as a starting point for this study is more than the use of an obvious benchmark. The death of Franklin Roosevelt removed a galvanizing figure who, through political skill and personal magnetism, had allowed American liberalism to survive its internal disorder.

According to Nation's eulogy of FDR:

Throughout the last twelve years the progressive political movement in this country has slowly crystallized around Mr. Roosevelt. It has not developed--or had a chance to develop--an independent program or national leadership.... In the President and the New Deal lay the strength of the whole progressive movement--and its weakness. In the degree to which American progressivism has been dependent on the President, it must experience a readjustment of values, a process of reintegration, before it can face adequately the new demands which will be made upon it.¹⁹

Though the full meaning of liberalism will become clearer in the body of the dissertation, it would be useful to anchor the discussion to a provisional definition. Two compatible but not identical definitions can provide a good beginning. According to Arnold Kaufman:

Liberals believe that a good society is one in which each person possesses the resources of materials, mind, and spirit, as well as the opportunities to carve out a career in conformity to that person's own nature and reasoned choice.²⁰

Robert Lekachman's definition is less precise but more indicative of the soul of liberalism:

¹⁹Freda Kirchwey, "End of an Era," Nation, 21 April 1945, p. 430.

²⁰Kaufman, p. 6.

Liberalism is even more an attitude than it is a program. Liberals are critical of injustice, suspicious of vested interests, friendly to change, hopeful of peaceful improvement and convinced that reasoned argument ultimately overcomes selfish opposition.²¹

That the attitude described by Lekachman should operate on the goals outlined by Kaufman by favoring a welfare state, in which the government undertakes such tasks as redistributing income, guaranteeing economic security, and assuring decent housing, health care, and education for all citizens, would seem wholly reasonable.²² A more detailed description of liberals' premises that lead them to the welfare state, the goals they seek in it, the methods they are willing and unwilling to employ, and how their views of the welfare state distinguish them from others on the American political spectrum will be the concern of the ensuing chapters.

²¹Lekachman, p. 62.

²²Clark, p. 69.

CHAPTER ONE

LIBERALISM'S PREMISES

Liberalism is, generically, the creed of all those who insist that a good society give ample scope to human liberty. Modern American liberals, in the narrower sense in which we shall be using the term, are members of this larger club, advocates of freedom under law. But devotion to liberty is only a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for being a liberal in America; Arthur Schlesinger acknowledges that conservatives are, in the broad sense, liberal about the basic shape of American society, too. To ascertain the distinctive features of liberalism we will begin by attempting to understand the premises of liberalism, to see the fundamental facts of American political life as they have been seen by prominent liberals.¹

I

If adherence to liberty is not enough to distinguish liberals from conservatives, there is the desire among liberals to dissociate themselves from the least attractive

¹Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Liberalism," Saturday Review, 8 June 1957, pp. 11-12.

aspects usually ascribed to conservatism--an excessive fear of change that is the companion of a slavish and unreasoning reliance on old ways and ideas. Their writings would suggest that liberals are more comfortable with a picture of themselves as the party of the future than the party of the past. Liberals would rather challenge Americans than comfort them. According to Schlesinger:

[Liberalism] must oppose the drift into the homogenized society. It must fight spiritual unemployment as it once fought economic unemployment. It must concern itself with the quality of popular culture and the character of lives to be lived in our abundant society.²

Even as America needs, for her own well-being, to be challenged, America cannot fulfill her mission among the nations of the world by boasting smugly of past accomplishments. We must come to grips with the "revolutionary thrust of our time [and] the human longings which animate it" by reviving our original mission as a bearer of hope to the oppressed.³

This liberal belief in the importance of noble aspirations and invigorating challenges found its clearest expression in the way liberals reacted to John Kennedy's presidency. Though later reassessments may have judged Kennedy's foreign policy as too aggressive and his domestic policies as too timid, liberals reacted favorably at the time

²Ibid., p. 37.

³Adlai E. Stevenson, "The Mission of Liberalism," New Republic, 24 September 1956, p. 11.

to the way Kennedy addressed a nation that had grown self-satisfied during the fifties. Arthur Schlesinger, who switched to John Kennedy in 1960 rather than support Adlai Stevenson for president a third time, said that Kennedy carried forward and completed a change in liberal politics begun by Stevenson. When Stevenson was nominated in 1952, a liberal politician was more likely to tell voters about benefits than to demand exertions.

Stevenson changed all that. His lofty conception of politics, his conviction that affluence was not enough for the good life, his impatience with liberal cliches, his contempt for conservative complacency, his summons to the young, his demand for new ideas, his respect for the people who had them, his belief that history afforded no easy answers, his call for strong public leadership--all this set the tone for a new era in Democratic politics.⁴

By 1960 Kennedy was talking in the "Stevenson idiom" by stressing "peril, uncertainty, sacrifice, purpose."⁵ The New Republic expressed the hope that Kennedy's distinctive contribution would survive him: "We are counting on a rising market for quality; on the persistence of that creative dedication, disciplined by social responsibility, that is represented by the Peace Corps and the civil rights movement."⁶

⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 23.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "The New Republic After Half A Century," New Republic, 7 November 1964, p. 16.

Arthur Schlesinger in particular was beguiled by the idea that good politics should be a source of excitement. Anticipating the end of a long conservative decade, he wrote:

The '60s will probably be spirited, articulate, inventive, incoherent, turbulent, with energy shooting off wildly in all directions. Above all there will be a sense of motion, of leadership, of hope.

When this happens, America will be herself again. she will deal affirmatively and imaginatively with her problems....⁷

Schlesinger seemed proudest of the way in which the Kennedy administration appealed to the young people of America, stirring their best instincts and making governmental service and political activity respectable again.⁸

All of this uplifting and inspiring tells us very little about what it is that liberals are challenging us to do. But it would be wrong to regard liberal enthusiasm as nothing more than an ingredient for achieving liberal goals. Liberals believe they represent the better angels of the American national character--though America occasionally forsakes liberalism, she always returns and becomes herself again. Liberals like to think they are on the side of both history and the people. This was the source of their optimism in the forties and fifties, fed by cheering election

⁷Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Politics of Hope (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), p. 93.

⁸Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, p. 740.

results. The 1948 election, the first test of New Deal liberalism without FDR, was particularly important. "Reaction is repudiated," said the New Republic after Truman's victory. "The New Deal is again empowered to carry forward the promise of American life."⁹ Truman's election, said the ADA, showed a liberal-labor coalition so strong "it could remake America."¹⁰ There was a similar sense of the reaffirmation of the relation between liberalism and America after Barry Goldwater's defeat in 1964. In some ways, though, the 1952 election may have been the most encouraging--not because liberals won, but because the first Republican president since Hoover found it necessary to accept the New Deal as a fact of American political life beyond rescinding.¹¹

Some liberals have expressed the hope that the altruism embodied in liberalism will be reflected in ideas and sentiments widely held, rather than just in Americans' behavior in the voting booth. Irving Sarnoff, for example, writing in New Republic, voices the belief that more generous welfare programs "might provide the youth of this country

⁹"Damn the Torpedos!" New Republic, 15 November 1948, pg. 1.

¹⁰"Truman Triumph Heralds New Era; Liberal-Labor Forces in Key Role," ADA World, 10 November 1948, p. 1.

¹¹Schlesinger, The Politics of Hope, p. 68. See also Young, The Politics of Affluence, p. 212.

with living institutions which would represent a buffer against the prevailing values of the marketplace. If children could grow up believing that it is considered socially legitimate for them seriously to work toward group ends rather than individual ones (while not, thereby, losing 'individuality'), much of the competitiveness which now seems to promote cases of delinquency might be reduced."¹² Even Arthur Schlesinger, who, as we shall see, likes to regard himself as among the least sentimental of liberals, asserted, without any supporting evidence, that America's turn from conservatism to liberalism in the early sixties corresponded to a decline of narrow self-interest as a political force. "Farmers dislike the excesses of the farm program. Workers begin to wonder whether higher wages are the answer to every thing. Businessmen know that everything else in society cannot be sacrificed to their own profits."¹³

There are dangers in this close identification of personal good will and liberal politics. It tends towards the conclusion that liberal programs must have improbable levels of public support to succeed. A New Republic article favoring a national housing program said that "every town,

¹²Irving Sarnoff, "Bad Boys, Bad Times," New Republic, 18 January 1960, p. 14.

¹³Schlesinger, The Politics of Hope, p. 91.

metropolitan area and rural region in this country should have an energetic citizens' housing and planning organization, representing a cross-section of popular interests and professional knowledge, intimately acquainted with the operations of local agencies,..."¹⁴ This close identification between liberalism and personal decency can also lead to an excessively politicized understanding of the way Americans behave. When Congress weakened World War II price controls in 1946, Nation said that the battle against excessive prices and profits could still be won "if consumers retain the price consciousness they have shown....and refuse, individually and collectively, to submit to profiteering."¹⁵ This is not the most plausible explanation of people's reluctance to buy high-priced goods. A suffocating embrace by liberals of admirable, but not extraordinary, personal conduct, raises the danger that liberalism, like socialism, would take up too many evenings.

Arthur Schlesinger is the most prominent liberal critic of the excessive optimism and sentimentality of certain liberals. Schlesinger tried hard to popularize a corrective sobriety, based on the political philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr. He approvingly quotes Niebuhr's

¹⁴Catherine Bauer, "The Middle Class Needs Houses Too, New Republic, 29 August 1949, p. 19.

¹⁵"The Shape of Things," Nation, 3 August 1946, p. 114.

characterization of the "prevailing liberal climate" in 1936: "Appeals to love, justice, good-will and brotherhood are bound to be efficacious in the end. If they have not been so to date we must have more appeals to love, justice, good-will and brotherhood."¹⁶ From the perspective of 1956, Schlesinger viewed such wooly-mindedness as a problem surmounted but a continuing temptation for liberalism. He was sterner in The Vital Center in 1949, when liberalism's future was in greater doubt:

We must grow up now and forsake the millennial dream. We will not arise one morning to find all need for further strain and struggle ended, while we work two hours a day and spend our leisure eating milk and honey. Given human imperfection, society will continue imperfect. Problems will always torment us, because all important problems are insoluble; that is why they are important. The good comes from the continuing struggle to try and solve them, not from the vain hope of their solution.¹⁷

Following Niebuhr, Schlesinger makes respect for human fallibility the basis of liberalism. Schlesinger says that liberals must confront the pressing problems of an industrialized society without losing sight of liberalism's much older commitment to the limited state, due process, gradualism, and empiricism. To think only of the good things that might be accomplished if enough power were given to

¹⁶Schlesinger, The Politics of Hope, p. 102.

¹⁷Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), p. 254.

good people is to ignore the corrupting effects of power and the impossibility of guaranteeing the rectitude of those who wield it.¹⁸

Despite Schlesinger's efforts, caution, pessimism, a keen sense of human fallibility--these attitudes still seem more appropriate to the conservative than the liberal outlook. Eleanor Roosevelt, not Reinhold Niebuhr, seems to embody the spirit of liberalism. Even Schlesinger himself, as we have seen, was susceptible to the belief that a certain style of national leadership could elicit dramatic changes in popular attitudes, human fallibility notwithstanding. Of course, liberals have not expressed much optimism during their decline over the last fifteen years. But whether this is only a temporary reaction to unfortunate circumstances, whether liberalism will again be filled with hope and enthusiasm when it sees its face reflected in America, must await the reascendence of liberalism.¹⁹

II

In addition to trying to inculcate a certain pessimism in liberalism, Schlesinger has tried hard, and more successfully, to displace any excessively refined theorizing with

¹⁸Ibid., p. 156. See also p. 166.

¹⁹Nuechterlein, "Schlesinger," pp. 9-11. See also Young, The Politics of Affluence, p. 32.

with an uncomplicated pragmatism.

I say that the liberal is the pragmatist. The liberal's greatest danger is not to understand this about himself and to conceive himself instead as the rationalist.... The tradition of American liberalism has been skeptical and empirical. It has thus made successfully the transition from the classical liberalism of laissez-faire economics to the social liberalism of the welfare state--from Adam Smith to Keynes, from Jefferson to Franklin Roosevelt.²⁰

Liberals like Schlesinger have turned the absence of a detailed theoretical approach to politics into one of the New Deal's greatest virtues. Because of its pragmatism the New Deal was able to urgently attack the problems of the Depression, without waiting to resolve trivial abstractions.

While theoretical constraints had paralyzed both capitalists and socialists in the 1930s, New Dealers simply pressed ahead with their experiments, trusting that American democracy was sensible enough to steer away from difficulties without the aid of refined public philosophies.²¹

It is not surprising that John Dewey, the foremost defender of pragmatism, has been praised in the pages of Nation and New Republic. "Dewey, as much as any living man or woman, has laid the foundations for a dwelling place for liberalism and rationalism."²² Dewey's insistence that growth

²⁰Schlesinger, "Liberalism," p. 12.

²¹Barr King, "Leon Keyserling's New Look," Nation, 14 January 1950, p. 33; Schlesinger, The Politics of Hope, p. 70.

²²"The Shape of Things," Nation, 22 October 1949, p. 385.

was the ultimate goal of good ethics and good politics appealed to liberals who felt "the need to supplement the narrow, self-centered individualism of the past with a new social conception of individuality consonant with the industrial conditions under which we live."²³

It has been through pragmatism, some liberals have argued, that American liberalism has been able to adhere to the principles of Jefferson during the rapid industrialization that transformed Jefferson's America. Laissez-faire probably is the way to promote life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in an agrarian society, but an industrial, urban society requires new methods to realize these goals. If it is to retain the flexibility to pursue its goals, liberalism can never be too closely identified with a particular agenda or ideology. The liberal's overriding commitment to freedom and welfare will lead him to do battle against various sorts of entrenched power in various circumstances, whether aristocrats, capitalists, dictators, or bureaucrats.²⁴

Schlesinger has extolled pragmatism as a distinctively American outlook essential to the nation's historical

²³Y. H. Krikorian, "The Ethics of Naturalism," New Republic, 17 October 1949, p. 34. See also Max J. Skidmore, American Political Thought (New York: St. Martin's, 1978), pp. 214-215.

²⁴Schlesinger, "Liberalism," pp. 12, 37; Robert Bendiner, "What is a Liberal?" Nation, 26 March 1949, pp. 349-350.

attainments. According to Schlesinger:

Through American history ideas have served as a means of releasing economic initiative and then as a means of chastening economic arrogance; as a means of stimulating private energy and then as a means of asserting public responsibility....What has mattered has been the philosophical flexibility, the intellectual resilience of the people--the capacity to face new problems relatively unencumbered by the cults and cliches of the past....The ability to change one's mind turns out, on last analysis, to be the secret of American economic growth, without which resources, population, climate, and the other favoring factors would have been of no avail.²⁵

America's ability to see its situation clearly, unscreened by an ideology, has permitted this country to accomplish great things, even under the duress of war and internal conflict.²⁶

Schlesinger has gone so far as to say that pragmatism is the central issue in the political struggles of our times. The "world civil war," he wrote, is "between dogmatism and pragmatism; between the theological society and the experimental society, between ideology and democracy."²⁷ In this view the Cold War became a struggle between rigidity and flexibility, and liberals had to defend the pragmatic vital center from extremist ideologues to the left and right.

²⁵ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Ideas and Economic Development," in Paths of American Thought, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and Morton White (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), p. 119.

²⁶ Schlesinger, The Politics of Hope, pp. 70-71.

²⁷ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Epilogue: The One Against the Many," in Paths of American Thought, p. 537.

Freedom implies humility, not absolutism; it implies not the tyranny of the one but the tolerance of the many. Against the monotholic world the American intellectual tradition affirms the pluralistic world. Against the world of coercion, it affirms the world of choice.²⁸

The rejection of tolerance, pluralism, and choice leads to dogmatism, and dogmatism, according to this argument, ultimately leads to totalitarianism. Totalitarianism appeals to many because it offers confidence and clarity to those who find the modern world frightening and confusing. The pragmatic liberal is both humble, in his refusal to pretend to have answers to the ultimate political questions, and brave, willing to keep trying to ameliorate the political situation in the absence of neat, definitive political precepts. Pragmatism is the liberal's response to the limitations imposed by modern epistemology. Through pragmatism the liberal seeks to turn a deficiency, the inability to discern first principles, into the virtue of measured restraint. "The ADA embodies the spirit of tolerance and humility which is deeply rooted in the American liberal tradition. We have rejected the false assumption that men must ultimately settle their differences over the barricades."²⁹

Given the gravity of America's crisis in 1933, the

²⁸ Ibid., p. 538.

²⁹ Address of Wilson W. Wyatt, ADA National Chairman, to ADA First National Convention. ADA Press Release, 21 February 1948. ADA papers, Series 4, number 9. See also Schlesinger, The Vital Center, p. 50.

New Deal could hardly await the clarification of theoretical subtleties; pragmatism was as good a justification for liberal policies as any. But the subsequent efforts, such as Schlesinger's, to make a virtue of this necessity are suspect. In the first place, even John Dewey seems to have had misgivings about the limitless flexibility admired by Schlesinger. "Experimental method is not just messing around, nor doing a little of this and a little of that in the hope that things will improve," he wrote. "Just as in the physical sciences, it implies a coherent body of ideas, a theory that gives direction to the effort."³⁰ Arthur Bestor, in the New Republic, argued that Dewey believed that the implications of modern totalitarianism for liberals were just the opposite of what Schlesinger supposed. According to Bestor, Dewey's pragmatism was helpful for liberalism until about 1930. When there was a widespread consensus as to what ought to be done, pragmatism solved the problem of how to do it--experimentally. But the rise of Fascism and Communism confronted liberal democracy with brutal enemies; the assumption that all reasonable men shared the same moral outlook would no longer suffice. Dewey became less of a pragmatist but more of a liberal under these circumstances, Bestor argues, praising democracy in terms of inalienable rights rather

³⁰Quoted in Rosenberg, "If FDR Were Alive Today..." p. 420.

than its latitude for social experiment.³¹

Dewey's pragmatism has been well described as "less a philosophy than a method of doing without one."³² That Schlesinger, among others, wants liberalism to be even more theoretically ungoverned than Dewey was willing to tolerate is hardly reassuring. Such a posture renders liberalism confusing and pointless. Writing in Nation, Michael D. Reagan said of the liberal approach to politics:

Each problem is taken by itself, without relating it to other problems and without any attempt to assess the extent to which some basic characteristic of our society may lie behind a whole range of problems. The solution is invariably a new federal grant-in-aid program--piece-meal tinkering with both the federal structure and the economy....Lacking any theory of what causes social dislocations in America, the liberals are unable to suggest basic reforms that might diminish the rate at which new problems similar to the old ones arise.³³

Without a unifying vision, liberal pragmatism becomes nothing more than ad hoc experimentation.³⁴

That pragmatism causes liberal intellectuals to confuse and mislead one another is not a major worry. But to the extent that intellectuals can make certain kinds of policies attractive or at least palatable by making them defensible, pragmatism has undermined the possibility of achieving stable and

³¹Arthur Bestor, "John Dewey and American Liberalism," New Republic, 29 August 1955, pp. 18-19.

³²Quoted in Goldman, Rendezvous With Destiny, p. 159.

³³Michael D. Reagan, "Power and Frustration," Nation, 5 March 1960, pp. 211, 213.

³⁴See Rosenberg, "If FDR Were Alive Today..." p. 420.

durable liberal policy-making. Schlesinger inadvertently revealed this weakness in a biting attack on Jimmy Carter in 1979. He compared Carter's caution unfavorably to FDR, who called for "bold, persistent experimentation," whose motto was "Above all, try something." Schlesinger says that liberals must approach the key problems of the eighties--energy and inflation--with the same boldness. He advocates selective wage and price controls and gasoline rationing, not as permanent solutions, but "as necessary ways to buy time for that process of social invention, innovation and experimentation that is the indispensable preliminary to lasting solutions."³⁵

The success of price controls and gas rationing is to be doubted, but this is the least of the problems with Schlesinger's analysis. What is particularly distressing is that he seems absolutely opaque to the possibility that flexible, even erratic, government policies have contributed to the problems of inflation and energy. There is no place in Schlesinger's analysis for the idea that imprudent monetary and fiscal policies might cause or exacerbate inflation, or for the thought that policy experimentation may have discouraged energy production and sheltered consumers from the realistic pricing system that can encourage energy conservation. "Above all, try something," is good advice in a

³⁵ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Who Needs Grover Cleveland?" New Republic, 7 July 1979, p. 15.

shipwreck; this does not make it a sound principle of navigation, and it is hard to imagine a worse attitude for avoiding or riding out storms.

There is the danger that under liberal pragmatism the government would occasionally solve a problem through blind luck, but will usually succeed only in transforming, perpetuating, and complicating problems. Arthur Schlesinger's political thinking on this point is less persuasive than that of James Madison, who summarized the evils of excessively mutable policies in Federalist #62. According to Madison, democracy is undermined if its laws cannot be understood, anticipated, or followed. Public instability favors the sharp insider over the industrious citizen who lacks the time or opportunity to react to numerous and complex new policies. Frequent policy changes add to the risks facing every enterprise--incessant revisions of the rules discourage people from playing at all. It might be said that the more bold, persistent experimentation there is in the public sector, the less there will be in the private sector. Worst of all, a government characterized by numerous and rapid changes in public policy will forfeit the public's trust and respect.³⁶

Stability is important for good government, but not equivalent to it. It will sometimes be necessary to improvise

³⁶The Federalist Papers (New York: New American Library, 1961), pp. 381-382.

to secure vital goals. But a philosophy of government that casually tolerates--even celebrates--instability is seriously deficient. There ought to be a place in liberal thought for an appreciation of government stability akin to Madison's. That such a thought does not show up in the writings of the most prominent modern liberals results from one of two things. Either liberal intellectuals are remiss, and have failed to acknowledge that stability is not only compatible with but essential to liberalism's larger purposes, or liberalism is itself deficient, inherently antagonistic to the idea that wise policy makers must resist the temptation to make every change that seems momentarily desirable.

III

Liberals are democrats, and the roots of modern liberalism show a determination to trust and empower the people. The populists and the progressives of the early twentieth century both wanted the people to have more power vis-a-vis the trusts and tycoons. It was more difficult to be a liberal and a democrat during the 1920s; in prosperity the people were more tolerant of the giant economic interests and less interested in reform. The Depression made it possible for liberals to re-embrace the people. The underlying purpose of the New Deal, according to Schlesinger, was "to use democratic means somehow or other to give the plain

people a better break in a darkly confusing world."³⁷ The liberal intellectual, in his view of the common man, traveled a long way from Babbitt to The Grapes of Wrath.³⁸

It is reasonable to believe that upon entering the postwar era, liberals would have liked to have kept the same warm regard for democracy.³⁹ But the robust economy of the forties and fifties complicated this relationship. Schlesinger explained Adlai Stevenson's defeat in 1952 by saying that, "Having been enabled by Democratic administrations to live like Republicans, the new suburbanites ended up voting like Republicans."⁴⁰ Furthermore, the powerful New Deal coalition forged in the Depression was less amicable as the new issues of the sixties were debated. Schlesinger defended Robert Kennedy in 1968 as the one candidate who could appeal to all the elements of the old coalition--ethnic minorities,

³⁷ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Roosevelt, vol. 3: The Politics of Upheaval (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p. 443.

³⁸ Nuechterlein, "The People vs. The Interests," pp. 67-69.

³⁹ "The Shape of Things," Nation, 27 April 1946, p. 493; Reinhold Niebuhr, "Halfway to What?" Nation, 14 January 1950, p. 26.

⁴⁰ Arthur M. Schlesinger, "Which Way for the Democrats?" Reporter, 20 January 1953, p. 32.

blue collar workers, and intellectuals.⁴¹ But Schlesinger never explained what, beyond Kennedy's personality, would hold this coalition together. Schlesinger's hopes that George McGovern would perform the same feat in 1972 were even more implausible.⁴²

The 1970s brought further strains on the liberals' efforts to retain the democratic spirit of the New Deal, strains which finally proved intolerable. The overwhelming passage of the Proposition 13 tax cuts in California in 1978, despite warnings of how the tax reduction would gut social services, was the most shocking event. Carey McWilliams, editorializing in the Nation, tried to be as kind to the California middle class as he could. Of course the decision to cut property taxes was a mistake, he said, but middle-class homeowners had legitimate grievances; McWilliams suggested that liberals should direct the ire of the middle class from the welfare state to giant corporations and the Pentagon.⁴³ Liberal politicians, who had to respect the tax

⁴¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Crisis of Confidence: Ideas, Power, and Violence in America (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), p. 285.

⁴² Nuechterlein, "Schlesinger," pp. 30-32.

⁴³ Carey McWilliams, "California Earthquake," Nation, 17 June 1978, pp. 714-715. See also Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Is Liberalism Dead?" New York Times Magazine, 30 March 1981, p. 73.

revolt, may have been impressed by McWilliams's argument. But most liberal intellectuals were not so willing to excuse or accomodate the middle class, judging by the vehemence of two other articles. According to the New Republic's editorial on the passage of Proposition 13, the motives of the tax cutter were elemental: "Launch the lifeboat--I'm aboard. Everybody else can swim to shore."⁴⁴ Peter Connoly wrote an article in Nation where he criticized those liberals, like McWilliams, who tried to make the best of the new tax cuts. He said that the tax cut movement was animated by "the ugliest kind of ressentiment and barely concealed racism," that it reflected "an America one thought blessedly gone, a country of raw economic greed, unmodulated by the precarious though real moral accomplishments of U.S. society during the past thirty years."⁴⁵

The reaction to Ronald Reagan's nomination and election was even less restrained. Some liberals have lost all patience with a country capable of choosing such a leader. One article noted that Reagan had grown up in small mid-western towns, "just the sort of places responsible for one of the raging themes of American literature, the

⁴⁴"Me First," New Republic, 17 June 1978, p. 5.

⁴⁵Peter Connoly, "The Voice of Raw Greed," Nation 22 July 1978, p. 77.

soul-murdering complacency of our provinces,...The best and brightest fled all our Galesburgs and Dixons, if they could, but the candidate was not among them."⁴⁶ Another article called the 1980 election a "degradation ceremony" in which "the Americans, a sanctimonious tribe, elected a bunch of thugs to plunder both the public purse and the nation's image."⁴⁷

Beneath this steady deterioration of the relationship between liberals and the American demos one finds certain tangible grievances. In the 1930s, the first steps in creating a welfare state were popular, and liberals may have been set up for later disillusion by the experience of doing well, politically, by doing good. Political victories in the postwar era were less frequent and less decisive; some liberals reacted to being rejected by the middle class by blaming middle-class stinginess for the difficulties of the welfare state. The middle class was accused of being opposed to programs to aid the poor because the disappearance of the poor would render the social status of those above them tenuous. The Nation said that there was no lie denigrating the poor so outrageous that large numbers of middle-class Americans would not believe it. Welfare reform

⁴⁶E.L. Doctorow, "The Rise of Ronald Reagan," Nation, 19 July 1980, p. 65.

⁴⁷Alan Wolfe, in "Symposium: What Is To Be Done?" Nation, 22 November 1980, p. 534.

was hopeless under these circumstances, because shabby treatment of the poor was a manifestation of basic public attitudes, not a departure from them.⁴⁸

There is also evidence that postwar liberals felt estranged from the middle class on cultural, one might almost say aesthetic, grounds, as well as for political reasons. An article in Nation in 1956 denies that there is any religiosity reflected in suburban church attendance: the churches that draw large numbers carefully avoid those Christian teachings that would challenge the smugness, vapidness, and materialism of the middle class.⁴⁹ Christopher Jencks, writing in the New Republic, concedes that programs for the poor should impart middle-class virtues "such as they are," but only with the understanding that these "virtues" are helpful devices for getting ahead in a middle class country, but have no intrinsic value for leading a satisfying life.⁵⁰ Among the questions raised by such attitudes is what sort of life

⁴⁸Adam Walinsky, "Keeping the Poor in Their Place: Notes on the Importance of Being One-Up," New Republic, 4 July 1964, p. 15; William B. Rollins and Bernard Lefkowitz, "Welfare a la Newbergh," Nation, 16 September 1961, pp. 159-160; Richard A. Cloward and Richard M. Elman, "Poverty, Injustice, and the Welfare State: Part 1: Ombudsman for the Poor?" Nation, 28 February 1966, pp. 230-235.

⁴⁹Stanley Rowland, Jr., "Suburbia Buys Religion," Nation, 28 July 1956, pp. 78-80.

⁵⁰Christopher Jencks, "Slums and Schools--I," New Republic, 10 September 1962, pp. 20-21.

the welfare state is supposed to elevate the poor to. A New Republic article rejects programs that would "assimilate the blacks on the same materialist basis that the labor movement has been assimilated," anticipating that "in a few decades blacks will be beating up on students."⁵¹ Presumably, the poor should acquire middle-class living standards without discarding any of their proletarian attitudes or bohemian folkways. Whether, or how, this is possible is not discussed in the writings of modern liberals.

The tone of the liberal critique of the American people turned from petulant to strident in the violence of the late sixties. Arthur Schlesinger wrote, "We are today the most frightening people on this planet."⁵² According to one of the editorials in the Nation, "We not only love violence but the more killing we can do, at a distance and with a minimum of risk, the better we like it."⁵³ Though the provocations were severe, particularly for Schlesinger when John and Robert Kennedy were killed, the descent of liberal analysis into moralism, "the tendency to reduce political

⁵¹Michael Miles, "Candidates and Cities," New Republic, 13 July 1968, p. 21.

⁵²Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "America 1968: The Politics of Violence," Harper's, August 1968, p. 19. See also, Schlesinger, The Crisis of Confidence, pp. 6-7, 48.

⁵³"Is Violence Un-American?" Nation, 6 September 1965, p. 109.

issues to moral terms and to arrange and comprehend those terms in such polarized fashion as to preclude complexity of analysis," is one of the least admirable developments of American liberalism.⁵⁴

It might be supposed that the violence in ghettos and campuses would also have been condemned as frightening. In fact, the liberal reaction to violence by those who had been rejected by the American middle class, such as blacks, or who had rejected that class, like student leftists, was milder, even sympathetic. Student revolts, said Schlesinger, were caused by the rigidity of university bureaucracies. "Both Berkeley and Columbia will be wiser and better universities as a result of the student revolts."⁵⁵ An assessment of the Black Panthers in the Nation can be fairly described as sycophantic:

The Black Panther Party is, by any definition a revolutionary group, one which is attempting to find-- and to a surprising extent has succeeded in finding-- revolutionary political theories which are applicable to the condition of black people in America today, particularly in urban America. Its synthesis of Mao and Malcolm, Fanon and Lenin (with the important addition of Cleaver's and Newton's own contributions) is no street hoodlum's hodgepodge but a careful winnowing of political thought.

⁵⁴Nuechterlein, "Schlesinger," p. 27.

⁵⁵Schlesinger, The Crisis of Confidence, p. 226.

Their analysis of the role of the police in white repression is accurate and brilliant.⁵⁶

Many liberals' reaction to the backlash against crime, riots, and demonstrations was as hysterical as the analysis of the riots and demonstrations was dispassionate and soothing. The Nation's reasoning was that the enormous gap between our races and classes guaranteed a revolution. By the sixties the black revolution was already underway; it could elicit either a good or a bad revolution among whites. It was possible that whites would react to the black revolution by finally insisting on racial justice, and would become determined to heal the wounds of racism at all costs. But the more probable outcome was far uglier. "Present odds are on the Fascist revolution, although it too is in an early and perhaps still reversible stage. But as the radio commentators used to say in the 1930s, it is later than you think."⁵⁷ Schlesinger, too, glimpsed a police state on the horizon when he contemplated those who would deal with crime by hiring more policemen, placing fewer restrictions on their actions, and putting tougher judges on the bench.⁵⁸

⁵⁶Gene Marine, "Mao, Malcolm, Fanon, and Lenin," review of Picking Up the Gun, by Earl Anthony, in Nation, 16 March 1970, p. 313. See also Elmer Bendiner, "America Absurd," review of Hell's Angels, by Hunter Thompson, in Nation, 3 April 1967, pp. 441-442, which tries to like the motorcycle gang for its "rough and ready anti-establishment fervor."

⁵⁷"The Three Revolutions," Nation, 14 August 1967, pp. 98-99.

⁵⁸Schlesinger, The Crisis of Confidence, p. 21.

Liberals can hardly be held completely responsible for the decline in the relationship with the American people that had been so close in the thirties. The history of the postwar era, particularly the 1960s, eroded many other, stronger, political relationships. Still, it is hard to disagree with Neuchterlein's assessment that "liberals made the worst of a bad situation."⁵⁹ It should not be so difficult for liberals to accept that their program will be more appealing to America sometimes than others, and to defend and refine their agenda while waiting for the lean years to pass. The venom of liberal writings on the people and the middle class in particular suggests two things. First, liberals had an exaggerated idea of the depth of the commitment America made to liberalism in the thirties, and did not appreciate the extent to which it was based on a coincidence of goals. Because of this exaggeration, liberals interpreted their season in political disfavor as the violation of a trust, and reacted with inordinate fury. That a great many Americans were unwilling to follow liberals wherever they led, even to Black Panther meetings, should have been even less surprising, yet it provoked still more outrage. Second, liberals have not thought clearly enough about their own place in American democracy. Liberals do

⁵⁹Neuchterlein, "Schlesinger," p.

seem to know that they are not simply populists, enthusiastically endorsing whatever it is the people want to do at any moment. And it seems clear that their convictions are not so inviolate that they would prefer being voices in the wilderness to taking account of a broad shift in American opinion. But beyond these thoughts, liberals have not wrestled with the question of how to navigate the wide spectrum between being totally principled and totally expedient. There seems to be no agreement on which of their goals are the more and less important, or on how to defend their goals to a skeptical citizenry. Until they have thought deeply about these questions, liberals cannot make the most persuasive defense of their position. And without their having made the effort to become more persuasive rhetoricians, it is particularly objectionable when liberals pass facile and demeaning judgments on their countrymen.

IV

We can fairly characterize the basic liberal view of American government by saying that liberals favor a strong federal government, and have generally looked to the presidency to be the dominant influence within the federal government. Arthur Schlesinger's pre-Watergate writings on the presidency were confident and unequivocal in their preference for the executive. "The American political system,

though misconceived by some as made up of three coordinate branches of equal powers, has worked best as a presidential system. Only strong Presidents have been able to overcome the tendencies towards inertia inherent in a structure so cunningly composed of checks and balances."⁶⁰ He tells us later in the same collection of essays:

An adequate democratic theory will recognize that democracy is not self-executing; that leadership is not the enemy of self-government but the means by which it can be made to work; and that Caesarism has been more often produced by the failure of weak governments than by the success of strong ones.⁶¹

For Schlesinger, like most liberals of his generation, FDR was the model of the vigorous chief executive who made American democracy work. But Schlesinger had gone all the way back to Andrew Jackson to find historical precedents for Roosevelt's style of governing in his second book, The Age of Jackson. The theme of this work was that Jackson set the model of the "militant democratic leader" to whom the American people have always turned when conservative courts and legislatures refuse to deal with economic crises.⁶²

Vietnam complicated the serene liberal appraisal of the presidency, and Watergate demolished it. Schlesinger

⁶⁰Schlesinger, The Politics of Hope, p. 9.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 21.

⁶²Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The Legacy of Andrew Jackson, American Mercury, February 1947, pp. 170-172. See also Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Jackson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947).

himself is the best indicator of this process; his book The Imperial Presidency was published in the middle of the Watergate crisis; and perfectly captured the deep misgivings about the power of the executive branch of that time. It is clear that Schlesinger takes a more sober view of the executive branch in this work. He admits some personal responsibility for the rise of "presidential mystique," and goes so far as to say that FDR was "a flawed, willful, and, with time, increasingly arbitrary man."⁶³ But beyond this, Schlesinger's revised thesis about the presidency is quite unclear. He has not jettisoned his earlier views. He still regards the presidency as "the most effective instrumentality of government for justice and progress," and warns that the schemes of "presidential subordination could easily be pressed to the point of national folly."⁶⁴ This dilemma is presumably to be resolved by contending "not for a strong Presidency in general, but for a strong Presidency within the Constitution."⁶⁵ But at the same time, "The effective means of controlling the Presidency lay less in law than in politics."⁶⁶ There are no systems of constraints, legal or

⁶³ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Imperial Presidency, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), pp. ix, 409.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 404, 405.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 405.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 410.

political, that will guarantee a strong predisency for a Franklin Roosevelt but a weak one for a Richard Nixon; the tergiversations of The Imperial Presidency suggest that many liberals have not come to terms with this fact.⁶⁷

The importance of the presidency to liberals has a psychological basis as well as a political one. It is fair to say that liberals have been conspicuous in the way they have responded to bold and appealing leadership. Schlesinger, again, is most prominent as a believer in what might be called the alchemy of leadership, the art of transforming political situations by the force of personality. Franklin Roosevelt was, of course, the master, but Adlai Stevenson, John Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy all shared this quality. RFK in particular had Roosevelt's capacities to empathize with others, and to illuminate tangled political conflicts, according to Schlesinger.⁶⁸ Liberals' attraction to leadership style would be unremarkable if it were merely in the service of the liberal agenda, but it often seems a value apart from, even opposed to, the liberal program. Martin points out that liberals overlooked Adlai Stevenson's

⁶⁷See also Edward Pessen, "The Arrogant Veto," Nation, 30 August 1975, pp. 133-137.

⁶⁸Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Roosevelt, vol. 2: The Coming of hte New Deal (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), p. 586; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Robert Kennedy and His Times (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), pp. 799, 891.

political caution and reluctance to antagonize the South on civil rights. He was forgiven because of his cerebral style, sense of humor, and skill at the podium. By contrast Harry Truman was much less popular with liberals of his day, though substantively he was much closer to them than was Stevenson.⁶⁹

The liberal sources used in this dissertation devote very little attention to the role and powers of Congress, except as these are the obvious complement of their writings on the presidency. Liberals have devoted a little more attention to the role of the judiciary, but their writings do not point to a consensus view, notwithstanding that the judicial activism of the Warren Court was routinely called "liberal." It is noteworthy that Alexander Bickel, prominent advocate of judicial restraint, was a contributing editor of the New Republic, for the last fifteen years of his life. In its pages he argued that "society at large ought to participate in the venture of governing itself," and cannot do so when the courts practice "the confident, single-minded imposition of solutions to problems of the first magnitude."⁷⁰ Bickel's influence led others at the magazine to argue for a limited role for the judges, as in an editorial arguing that Roe v. Wade was a mistake, and

⁶⁹ Martin, Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism, pp. 99-100. See also Richard J. Whalen, Catch the Falling Flag: A Republican's Challenge to His Party (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), p. 108.

⁷⁰ Alexander M. Bickel, "Close of the Warren Era," New Republic 12 July 1969, pp. 15-16.

that the abortion issue should have been left to the states.⁷¹ At the Nation, however, Roe v. Wade was praised, and the Supreme Court was criticized for refusing to insist on the reorganization of public school financing.⁷² Similarly, Joseph Rauh, a leading figure in the ADA, found the whole controversy over judicial activism pointless--judges were policy makers, too, he said, and should have the same leeway as those in the executive and legislative branches.⁷³

Liberals are much less divided on the question of federalism. They have regularly favored assigning a governing function to the federal government that others believe should be given to, or left with, the states. Several paths lead to this conclusion. Some liberals argue that the federal government is more efficient than states and localities. Only the federal government can surmount economies of scale to undertake the policy experimentation and analysis needed for progress. Local and even state governments cannot deal with problems that transcend arbitrarily drawn boundary

⁷¹"Abortion," New Republic, 10 February 1973, p. 9.

⁷²"Jane Roe and Mary Doe," Nation, 5 February 1973, p. 165; John E. Coons, "In a Manner Restrained," Nation, 30 April 1973, p. 556.

⁷³Joseph Rauh, "The Chief," review of Earl Warren: A Public Life, by G. Edward White, New Republic, 9 August 1982, p. 32.

lines, problems like pollution, mass transit, and industrial development. The record of the federal government compares very favorably to the states'.⁷⁴

Other liberals argue that the federal government is a more equitable source of policy in a modern economy. For one thing, federal revenues are derived largely from an income tax that is at least nominally progressive and is capable of being made more so. By contrast, state governments rely heavily on sales taxes, and local governments on property taxes, both of which are regressive. The federal government alone, then, is in a position to fund needed programs without burdening those who can least afford it. Furthermore, it is only at the federal level that the influence of private interests on public policy is most diluted. Mining interests will have less influence on the U.S. Congress than on the West Virginia legislature, making a just and prudent federal policy more likely.⁷⁵

The arguments for centralized policy-making on the

⁷⁴Myron Lieberman, "Four Myths Cripple Our Schools," Nation, 28 February 1959, pp. 179-182; Amitai Etzioni and Marina Ottaway, "The Next Domestic Disaster," Nation, 29 January 1973, pp. 140-141; Gilbert A. Harrison, "Carry Me Back: Some Notes on Barry Goldwater," New Republic, 27 March 1961, p. 16.

⁷⁵"No Room," New Republic, 9 September 1957, pp. 3-4; Harry W. Ernst, "Federal Aid or Local Taxes?" Nation, 4 June 1960, p. 492; Grant McConnell, "Big Government Bogy: Who'd Gain by Smallness?" Nation, 14 November 1953, pp. 386-387.

grounds of efficiency and equity are plausible, but a third argument is more ambitious but less compelling. Speaking directly to the enterprise of the welfare state, it claims that the federal government is more benevolent than others. A New Republic article claims that "local and state electorates" have repeatedly shown their aversion to paying for a better school system. Thus, "friends of education have called for massive federal aid."⁷⁶ In the same vein, another article charges that local school boards are not "manifestations of Jeffersonian democracy," but havens for "ambitious politicians and irate taxpayers who would rather keep the local property tax down than provide children with decent education."⁷⁷ And if localities cannot be trusted to tax themselves, they cannot be trusted either to spend tax dollars collected by the federal government: there is scarcely a good word to be found for revenue sharing in the writings of liberals.⁷⁸

⁷⁶Christopher Jencks, "Paying for Education--II," New Republic, 1 February 1964, p. 14.

⁷⁷"Subsidies for Schools," New Republic, 8 February 1960, pp. 4-5.

⁷⁸See, for example, "One Nation, Indivisible," New Republic, 17 March 1973. p. 8. An intriguing plan to use federal income tax credits as an incentive to raise state income taxes has been advanced in the New Republic and by the ADA. The idea is that states do not lack resources so much as they lack the political will to tax them. See Melville J. Ulmer, "Better than Revenue Sharing," New Republic, 13 February 1971, pp. 16-19; Summary by Robert R. Nathan and Edward D. Hollander on The Role of Individual Income Taxes in Federal--State--Local Fiscal Relationships, for the Ways

There is something odd about attacks on "state and local electorates." Such groups are presumably distinguishable from the "national electorate," yet it is undeniable that electorates at all levels of American politics are comprised of the same citizens. Is it suggested that these citizens change their politics between elections, or even when moving from one part of the ballot to another? I find no evidence that any liberal has ever confronted this argument, but one can discern that some liberals sense that added federal power is in need of a broader justification. This is to be found by invoking the national interest as a reason for turning to the national government:

We are a nation. Connecticut citizens do have an interest in the quality of rivers in Massachusetts, of highways in Wyoming, schools in Mississippi, and life in Harlem. We cannot leave it wholly up to 50 state legislatures to determine whether and how national resources are used to meet national needs.⁷⁹

If the idea of a discernible state electorate can be clarified, the explanation may lie in the idea of the national interest. Perhaps truly national problems affect Americans as Americans, and cause them to elect federal officials on different criteria than they employ in thinking about state and local matters, where their interests are more prosaic.⁸⁰

and Means Committee of the House of Representatives. ADA Papers, Series 4, number 27.

⁷⁹James Tobin, "Barry's Economic Crusade," New Republic, 24 October 1964, p. 16.

⁸⁰"The Welfare Burden," Nation, 20 January 1969, p. 68; Louis Fisher, "Federal Revenue Sharing: A Cautionary Word," New Republic, 4 October 1969, pp. 15-17.

This explanation, if it does in fact capture the liberal outlook on the issue, still suffers from two difficulties. First, liberals should define in greater detail what they mean by the national interest. It is not enough to say that citizens in Connecticut have an interest in the highways in Wyoming. Presumably, the citizens of Wyoming have an even deeper interest in them, as well as a better idea of how to care for them. Might it not be better for the citizens of Wyoming to act on their more serious concern for their highways through the state government, than for the citizens of Connecticut to act on their concern through the national government? To put the same point another way, is it sufficient to establish that a problem involves the national interest if it can be shown that it transcends state boundaries? Is there any aspect of life in Wyoming--or Harlem or Mississippi--that has no impact at all on residents of Connecticut, and is thereby an appropriate concern of the state legislatures? It is hard to escape the suspicion in considering these questions that for many liberals the liberal agenda is the national interest. This, too, may be a defensible position. But it means that efforts to justify the liberal agenda by appealing to the national interest simply beg the question.

The second problem with the liberal preference for, and justification of, a stronger federal government is its anti-democratic implication. Our nation of 230 million has

537 elected federal officials. As a rule, a citizen can vote for only five of them: President, Vice President, two Senators, and one Representative. State and local officials are far more numerous, both in the aggregate and in relation to the voters. To be sure, the importance and visibility of federal officials may introduce a qualitative depth to their relations with constituents that compensates for the quantitative differences. Still, it is not unreasonable to believe that one reason liberals favor the federal government is that it is insulated to some extent from democratic pressures, because federal elected officials have some leeway vis-a-vis their constituents, and because unelected federal officials--bureaucrats--have some leeway vis-a-vis the elected ones. Acknowledging such a goal should not be destructive to liberalism. The Federalist Papers frankly admitted that the Constitution had elements that restrained, delayed, and moderated the forces of democracy; and the project of Madison and Hamilton, far more ambitious than modern liberalism's was not undone. But liberals have made it difficult for themselves to openly assume the position taken by Madison and Hamilton. For all the denigrating remarks about the American people in recent years, there is no evidence of a liberal reassessment of the idea of democracy. To assert frankly that the welfare state should be subject to the mediated rather than the direct judgment of the American

people would probably discomfit many liberals as an "elitist" argument. It is preferable to find other grounds for vindicating federal authority than to admit there is a prospective conflict between liberal benevolence and liberal populism.

V

A final aspect of the liberal attitude towards American government needs to be considered. Having examined how liberals view the relationships between the people and government, among the various levels of government, and among the various branches of the federal government, it remains to be seen how they understand the relationship between the public and private sector. Liberals are often attacked for advocating "Big Government." One liberal response is that it is a necessary counterweight to big business:

If the basic decisions are to be made either in a directors' boardroom or in a government agency, then the political process permits us a measure of access, at least, to a governmental agency. Big government, for all its dangers, remains democracy's only effective response to big business--especially when big business behaves with such political recklessness as it has behaved in the United States.⁸¹

The giant corporation has gone far to escape the discipline of the marketplace, through research, marketing, and diversification. Thus disencumbered, corporate directors have great leeway in their decision-making. To relentlessly oppose

⁸¹Schlesinger, The Vital Center, p. 182.

the growth of Big Government is to simply acquiesce to such private power, and in all the social consequences of its use. The expansion of government, liberals have agreed, confronts the semi-autonomous corporate sector with a democratic adversary.⁸²

Liberals find other merits in the public sector. Schlesinger, perhaps as an historian of the New Deal, is emphatic on this point. Only by using an excessively abstract notion of freedom, he says, can one sustain the claim that the welfare state has incurred on liberty. The "freedom" to despoil the environment, discriminate against minorities, and exploit labor are well ended. Further, the government has been more efficient in the pursuit of its goals than it is given credit for. The growth of government has been accompanied by an increase in the number of technicians and experts working for the government, making possible a steady improvement in the performance of the public sector. In any case, large organizations, public and private, all exhibit the deficiencies of bureaucracy, and it is hardly fair to single out the government.⁸³

⁸²Schlesinger, "Andrew Jackson," p. 172; J. Donald Kingsley, "Retort to Reaction," review of Road to Reaction, by Herman Fine, in New Republic, 28 January 1946, p. 130; Henry Fairlie, "In Defense of Big Government," New Republic, 13 March 1976, p. 27.

⁸³Schlesinger, The Crisis of Confidence, pp. 259-260; "Is Liberalism Dead?" p. 71: The Vital Center, p. 155; Irving Howe, "The Right Menace," New Republic, 9 September 1978, pp. 17-18.

It would be incorrect to leave the impression that all liberals, or liberals generally, have been completely sanguine about Big Government. Some liberals, sensitive to the charge that too much power has been concentrated in Washington, try to turn the argument around. Liberals have been more adept at the conservative goal of decentralization than conservatives, they claim. Liberals have tried to return power to the people, with New Deal programs like the TVA and Great Society programs like community action, where conservatives only seem to return power to those who are already powerful.⁸⁴ Nonetheless, the possibility that federal controls can ossify, that some government undertakings are unproductive or even counterproductive, does not go unacknowledged. Indiscriminate conservative attacks on the welfare state are bound to be right at least occasionally.⁸⁵

The other conservative charge often made about Big Government is that, in addition to jeopardizing liberty, its profligacy will wreck the economy. Liberals disagree. Some of them point out that throughout the economic miracle of postwar West Germany, the proportion of its national income

⁸⁴"The Shape of Things," Nation, 29 January 1949, p. 114; Schlesinger, The Crisis of Confidence, pp. 257-258.

⁸⁵Schlesinger, The Crisis of Confidence, p. 255; Howe, "The Right Menace," p. 17.

spent by government was larger than in the U.S. or in other West European countries where the economy grew at a slower pace.⁸⁶ Others argue that a nation as prosperous as America can afford to achieve all the liberal goals, if only she wills it: "The truth is that this country can, within extremely broad limits, afford anything it chooses,...The real issue is how serious the Administration, Congress, and the comfortable (and large) middle classes are about licking poverty."⁸⁷ The liberal agenda, whatever its cost, is cheap compared to the consequences of failing to address the problems of the poor.⁸⁸

This argument, that poverty is a problem so severe that the criteria of cost and performance must be relaxed, was made with some frequency by liberals in the aftermath of the Great Society, when there were many calls for limiting the commitment to the welfare state. "This country cannot not afford the [elimination of poverty]. Whatever else may be sacrificed, the money needed to tackle the grave social problems of an increasingly complex society must be found."⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Edwin L. Dale, Jr., "Confessions of a One-Time Conservative," New Republic, 29 May 1961, p. 10; Morton Kondracke, "The German Challenge to American Conservatives," New Republic, 29 September 1979, pp. 16-21.

⁸⁷ "Nixon's Affluence," New Republic, 30 August 1969, p. 8.

⁸⁸ William Serrin, "Who Cares About Rebuilding the City?" New Republic, 4 May 1968, p. 11.

⁸⁹ "Nixon's Affluence," p. 8.

Of course, even by the late sixties a considerable sum had already been spent in anti-poverty programs, and the results were often dissapointing. It has been argued by some liberals that federal programs to help the poor faced such forbidding problems that even minor gains cannot be dismissed. If only a few Job Corps trainees or Head Start students make gains, this is still a valuable improvement over the tragic situation where no one emerges from the ghetto.⁹⁰

In addition to using social policies to alleviate poverty, liberals have argued, for most of the postwar era, that through macroeconomic policy the government can insure the expansion of the economy and of the labor market that the fight against poverty requires. Such a view is nothing but orthodox Keynesianism, and until the 1970s, American liberals were among its most faithful adherents. Edwin L. Dale summarized the liberal outlook with sweeping confidence in the New Republic:

The way to achieve the best of all economic worlds (rapid growth, full employment, stable prices, favorable balance of payments, more investment, no recessions, better living standards) is to spend as much government money as possible, and make sure that the amount the government spends rises rapidly each year.

The reason for this is not that government spending

⁹⁰Colman McCarthy, "The Job on the Job Corps," New Republic, 5 July 1969, pp. 19-21; "Poor Education," New Republic, 21 March 1970, p. 9.

is inherently better than private spending, though that may be true. The reason is that a very high level of government spending, no matter where the money goes, assures a very high level of demand. And a high level of demand is the open sesame to everything else.⁹¹

It is not surprising that those who can entertain the possibility that public spending might be inherently better than private spending do not emphasize the importance of profits. The argument more likely to be made by liberals is that excessive profits are the cause of economic stagnation. High profits either depress the wage level or inflate the price level; both developments lead to an inadequate level of aggregate demand, and, ultimately to a recession. There are no circumstances, then, under which a higher tax on profits is a bad idea. When inflation is a problem, higher taxes can yield a counter-inflationary budget surplus. When unemployment is the concern, the base for a profits tax will shrink, and the resulting deficit spending will stimulate the economy. It cannot be said with finality that liberals are utterly indifferent to the importance of retained earnings in economic expansion. But they say very little about it, and a good deal more about how the government can make better use of profits than the enterprises that have

⁹¹Dale, "Confessions," pp. 9-10. See also Conference on Economic Progress, "Toward Full Employment and Production," New Republic, 9 August 1954, p. 9; Schlesinger, The Vital Center, p. 183.

earned them.⁹²

There is another, more potent way in which liberal economic analysis supports the liberal political agenda.

An article in the ADA World makes the point explicitly:

Greater equality in the distribution of income is not merely a requirement of justice in a free society; it is a necessary condition for the maintenance of full production and full employment.⁹³

The redistribution of income has a clear macroeconomic rationale for those who see the regulation of aggregate demand as the key to prosperity. If more income went to poor families, their tendency to spend a very high proportion of their income would increase the overall demand for goods and services, ensuring stable and continuing economic expansion.⁹⁴

⁹²"Tax Those Profits," New Republic, 24 September 1966, pp. 5-6; "Plotting a New Depression," New Republic, 17 December 1945, pp. 819-820; George Soule, "It's Not a Depression--Yet," New Republic, 25 April 1949, p. 13.

⁹³"What Do 'Welfare State' Foes Offer?" ADA World, 21 November 1949, p. 1A.

⁹⁴"The Apple Has ONLY Two Halves," Nation, 28 April 1945, p. 437. See also "The Submerged Ten Million," New Republic, 5 December 1949, pp. 5-6.

CHAPTER TWO

LIBERALISM'S GOALS

I

Liberals' welfare state goals are at once obvious and mystifying. Liberals seek to do good. President Roosevelt's 1944 State of the Union address is the most direct statement of these intentions. "We may not be content, no matter how high the general standard of living may be," he said, "if some fraction of our people--whether it be one-third or one-fifth or one tenth--is ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed, and insecure."¹ To avoid this he proposed "a second Bill of Rights," which included "the right to a useful and remunerative job," "the right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing and recreation," "the right of every family to a decent home; the right to adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health; the right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment; the right to a good education."² But these simple, charitable impulses do not define

¹Eugene J. McCarthy, A Liberal Answer to the Conservative Challenge (New York: Praeger, 1964), pp. 40-41.

²Ibid.

a clear political program. It is not easy to say what the motivations or ultimate purposes of liberal charity are, or how other goals can accomodate the welfare state and its budget, or how strong the rights to economic security are, or how they are related to other rights.

Liberal activists, writers, and intellectuals of the postwar era have not tried to answer these questions. Apparently, they have not felt that it was important to answer them, for in the literature in which postwar liberalism expresses itself, the wisdom of the Second Bill of Rights is not questioned, and the only interesting problems raised in connection with it are the political problems of getting it enacted and funded. As the ADA expressed itself on this point:

ADA believes that every American has a right to public protection from personal socio-economic catastrophe resulting from sickness, disability, unemployment, or age. These services must be given without harassment, humiliation, or unwarranted restrictions.³

With these goals, the most important word for modern liberals has been "more"--more government money for education, health, housing, and income maintenance, more government programs to help the disadvantaged. Accordingly, liberals have banished "less" or "enough" from the domestic policy vocabulary. People who use such words about the welfare state don't

³Preamble, ADA Papers, Series 4, number 65.

realize that America's domestic crises could tear the nation apart, or that admonitions to individuals to provide for themselves through private insurance or savings are cruel and hollow, or that present levels of government parsimony demean and deny needy Americans.⁴

It is clear that the liberal agenda requires a prosperous economy--I know of no suggestion by any liberal that a poor country can transform itself into a rich one by increased welfare state spending.⁵ In the late 1940s, when the influence of Keynes on American liberals was strongest, it was assumed that prosperity required the liberal agenda. We have noted the happy discovery by liberals that their agenda would strengthen aggregate demand and ensure prosperity. When the economy boomed in the 1950s, despite failure to enact most of their programs, liberals had to reconsider their position on the relation between social spending and prosperity. Some liberals argued that in the new affluent society prosperity could be more or less assumed, and that liberals

⁴"Poverty Cuts," New Republic, 13 July 1968, p. 8; "Medical Care for the Aged," New Republic, 7 March 1960, p. 5; Louis H. Henry, "Caring for Our Aged Poor," New Republic, 22 May 1971, p. 22; "Feeding the Poor," New Republic, 30 October 1971, pp. 10-11; "State of the Union: A Program for Liberal America," New Republic, 10 January 1949, p. 13.

⁵See, for example, Leon Keyserling, "Eggheads and Politics," New Republic, 27 October 1958, pp. 14-15.

should insist that at any particular level of prosperity the overall health of society was now better served by government provision of public goods than by the limitless increase of consumer goods.⁶ Others argued that liberals should continue to stress the prime importance of economic growth:

An increase of one percentage point in the national rate of economic growth solves far more problems of human misery, insofar as they stem from unemployment or low income, than all the retraining programs, union resistance to automation, poverty programs, distressed-area programs and the rest put together. This is not to oppose the programs aimed at tackling special cases, but to put them in perspective: All put together, they cannot accomplish nearly as much good as a difference between \$40 billion and \$30 billion in the growth of the Gross National Product.⁷

The distinction between advocates of growth and advocates of redistribution did not amount to more than a difference of emphasis within liberalism for most of the postwar era. There was nothing politically attractive about criticizing economic growth, and to have moved very far in the advocacy of economic growth as a substitute for the welfare state would have been to echo American conservatives. Liberals tended, then, to advocate both an expanding pie and a larger slice for the welfare state. No single policy combines both these emphases better than government guarantees

⁶John Kenneth Galbraith, The Affluent Society, 2nd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), p. 152.

⁷Edwin L. Dale, Jr., "The Big Gun on Poverty," New Republic, 7 August 1965, p. 14. See also Keyserling, "Eggheads," pp. 13-17.

of full employment. Liberals favored the Full Employment Act of 1946, regretted Congress's deletions of provisions that would have required government policies that guaranteed full employment, and favored efforts to reinstate such provisions through the Humphrey-Hawkins full employment bill in the seventies. In both decades, many liberals answered questions about the government's capacity to actually achieve full employment by saying that the urgency of the goal justified any risks in trying to attain it.⁸

Other liberals have acknowledged that macroeconomic policy is a clumsy tool for promoting full employment--guaranteeing private sector jobs for the least employable will require levels of government stimulus that could unhinge the economy. For that reason, full employment policies are going to require large programs of direct hiring by the government, as in the New Deal's Works Progress Administration. By whatever means, full employment is imperative. Without it, all other welfare problems are insoluble. With it, liberals have maintained, we can finally distinguish the victims of a malfunctioning economy from those who cannot lead decent lives without direct income and services from the government.⁹

⁸Speed the Murray Bill!" Nation, 25 August 1945, p. 169; "Wary of Welfare," New Republic, 5 June 1976, pp. 3-4. See also Dorothy R. Steffens, "The Promise of Humphrey-Hawkins," Nation, 21 January 1978, pp. 50-52.

⁹Christopher Jencks, "Johnson vs. Poverty," New Republic, 28 March 1964, pp. 17-18; "And the Jobless," Nation, 22 February 1977, pp. 228-229; Rep. John Conyers, Jr., "The

Virtually all liberals believe that the market economy is incapable of generating full employment and economic security; the government will have to act vigorously to correct its deficiencies. But it is possible to distinguish liberals who favor more government activity as a goal in itself from others for whom a prominent, active public sector is only a means to the goals of a gentler, more equitable society. Those whom we might call "left-wing liberals" believe that the ultimate goal of liberalism should be a planned economy. In their view, capitalism's problems are deeper than the business cycles or maldistribution of income. Capitalism directs resources towards their greatest profit, but a planned economy would direct them towards the greatest needs. More low-cost housing would be built because, despite the smaller profit margin, the need for such housing is greater. Similarly, the search for a non-inflationary economic policy to reduce unemployment (or, conversely, a policy to fight inflation that does not create a recession) is hopeless. The free market economy is incapable of performing so well, these liberals argue. Only mandatory, permanent, wage and price controls can deliver a stable economy.¹⁰

Real Problem is Poverty," Nation, 24 January 1976, p. 83; John J. Corson, "Social Security Needs Modernizing," New Republic, 8 May 1950, p. 12; Nick Katz, "The Politics of Welfare Reform," New Republic, 14 May 1977, p. 19.

¹⁰"State of the Union," New Republic, 10 January 1949, p. 3; Henry Wallace. "Trust Busters and Planners," New Republic, 8 September 1947, pp. 14-15; Melville J. Ulmer,

For the liberals who place so high a value on the transformation of America's political economy, liberalism itself makes sense only as a stage in that transformation, not as a permanent structure of reformed capitalism. As fast as the political education of Americans will allow, they argue, liberals must proceed from compensating for capitalism's defects to replacing capitalism itself. If they are to do this, liberals must never lose track of the inevitable link between their own sentiments and the socialist agenda. In a 1974 article in Nation, Michael Harrington argued that the policies preferred by liberals are "socialist in all respects save one--they do not mention socialism. They are for the redistribution of wealth, for government intervention on behalf of the poor, minorities and working people, and for the extension of public ownership."¹¹

Other liberals are skeptical about being a way station to socialism, both because they have misgivings about socialism itself, and because of their aversion to ideological rigidity. Arthur Schlesinger may be regarded as representative of this viewpoint. He insists that liberals must pursue a mixed economy that is neither distinctly capitalist nor

"Jobs, Inflation, and Liberal Politics," New Republic, 20 March 1976, p. 8.

¹¹Michael Harrington, "Say What You Mean--Socialism," Nation, 25 May 1974, p. 649. See also George Soule, "The Full Employment Bill," New Republic, 6 August 1945, pp. 154-156; I.F. Stone, "Will America Be Socialist?" Nation, 11 August 1945, pp. 124-125.

socialist. Schlesinger doubts that political freedom can withstand the concentration of economic power. And he thinks that the administrative difficulties of a centrally directed economy are excessive. He feels that it is those to his left who do not take the humane goals of liberalism seriously enough, and seek institutional change for its own sake.¹²

These "centrist" liberals are unquestionably skeptical about free markets, but they also acknowledge the role a pricing system plays in the transmission of important economic information. "Bureaucratic decisions can never anticipate all the economic contingencies which a free market holds in some kind of harmony....We only know that a completely free market lacks the self-regulating power once ascribed to it and that too inclusive planning destroys the flexibility which a health economy requires."¹³ The solution is for the government to determine the economic framework and secure the general level of performance, then let the private sector determine the details within these boundaries. "The state should aim at establishing conditions for economic decisions, not at making all the decisions

¹²Schlesinger, The Coming of the New Deal, pp. 69-70. See also Schlesinger, Vital Center, pp. 150-151; Robert Lekachman, "Income and Welfare," review of The Ethics of Redistribution, by Bertrand de Jouvenel, in Nation, 14 June 1952, p. 584

¹³Reinhold Niebuhr, "Halfway to What?" p. 28.

itself....it should expend its main strength (1) in determining the broad level and conditions of economic activity through indirect means and (2) in making a success of projects clearly its own responsibility."¹⁴

In this formulation the welfare state will be a continuing necessity; the private sector will never live up to the standards a wise government will set for the economy. Consequently, the government must act, by one means or another, to ensure that the deficiencies are made up. It must, for example, determine how many new houses will be needed over a period of five or ten years, and then stand ready to build whatever portion of that number the construction industry does not. Similarly, the federal government should establish goals for economic expansion and job creation, and then employ all those who cannot find jobs in the private sector.¹⁵

Whatever the degree of enthusiasm they harbor for the growth of government, liberals seem united in their preference for higher taxes. Infinitely higher? The possibility of excessive taxation is occasionally noted, but not without a quick insistence that we are nowhere close to such a problem. As Keynesians, liberals have been sanguine

¹⁴Schlesinger, Vital Center, pp. 182-183, 185.

¹⁵"Ten Million New Homes, New Republic, 27 August 1945, p. 237; "Is It Full Employment?" New Republic, 18 February 1946, p. 240.

about deficit spending which can be accomplished through cutting taxes as well as increasing spending. They invariably prefer the latter method. Because a democracy is not an easy place to be identified as the inveterate advocates of higher taxes, liberals' rhetoric on taxes is often preoccupied with "closing loopholes." Though many of the loopholes turn out, on examination, to be such boons to the middle class as the deductibility of mortgage interest, the impression meant to be left by this rhetorical slant is that other people's taxes--wealthier people's taxes--are the ones that will be raised.¹⁶

Another unpleasant consequence of more government activity is the debasement of the currency. It was at one time possible for liberals to speak evenly of accepting higher inflation in order to reduce unemployment. Their confidence reflected the beliefs that inflation and unemployment were on a rigid seesaw, and that full employment was the fundamental goal of domestic policy. The experience in the sixties and seventies of rising inflation, accompanied by rising unemployment, drove the advocacy of inflation out of liberals' rhetoric. As early as 1970 one could read in the New Republic that a 3½% inflation rate was intolerable. Solving inflation was another problem. Except for those

¹⁶Howe, "The Right Menace," p. 17; "Tax Reform," New Republic, 9 January 1961, pp. 11-12; Irving Kristol, Two Cheers for Capitalism (New York: Basic Books, 1978), pp. 202-210.

who remained confident about wage and price controls, an increasingly lonely group, it was hard to find liberals willing to say anything about inflation; one of ADA's officers called it "the black hole of liberal politics-- touch it and you disappear."¹⁷

II

Liberals are, then, proponents of charitable works who are willing, and in some case eager, to see the government exercise more power and resources in the pursuit of these goals, and who are, or have been, willing to accept higher taxes and inflation to attain these charitable purposes. It remains to be seen whether modern liberals see good works as a medial or ultimate goal. We may begin by noting that since most liberals are unwilling to trust economic expansion alone to provide for the poor, assisting the poor through a welfare state will entail some degree of income redistribution: the government must take money from some and give it to others, and the donors will presumably, as a rule, be wealthier than the recipients. The relationship between welfare and redistribution in liberal thought is unclear, however. It could be that redistribution is

¹⁷David Gelman et al, "Wanted: A Liberal Agenda," Newsweek, 30 March 1981, p. 81; Edwin L. Dale, Jr., "The Case Against a Tax Increase," New Republic, 2 April 1966, pp. 11-13; Melville Ulmer, "Economic Slowdown," New Republic, 28 February 1970, p. 11.

nothing more than a by-product of alleviating poverty, but we need to consider as well the possibility that redistribution of income is a separate goal within liberal thinking, one that is either a companion to liberals' welfare goals, or the ultimate goal to which the welfare goals are directed.

We may begin by noting the contention made by some liberals that economic inequality reinforces and perpetuates the welfare problems liberals are determined to solve. Christopher Jencks, for example, has argued that attempts to improve public education for the poor founder on political obstacles, obstacles created by the inequality of American society. Middle-class and upper-class parents don't want an equal education for their children--they want a superior education so their children will have an advantage in the job market. When these parents cannot prevent the poor from getting a better education they try to retain their children's comparative position by improving their education to a corresponding degree. Galbraith has argued, similarly, that economic growth is particularly advantageous to the upper classes, that it continuously strengthens the position of those who already wield decisive political and economic power. The goals of helping the poor cannot, therefore, be reconciled with any thoughts of leaving the relative positions of America's social classes undisturbed.¹⁸

¹⁸Christopher Jencks, "LBJ's School Program: A Revolution in American Education?" New Republic, 6 February 1965, pp. 17-18; "Galbraith and Schlesinger Reply to Leon

From this point of view, welfare programs that aim only at alleviating poverty, as if that goal can be accomplished without challenging the status of other classes in society, are futile.

The basic idea of the "war on poverty" suggests that the enemy is impersonal, a matter of "unfortunate" circumstances like "ignorance" or "disease." But, in fact, there are people and institutions who have a vested interest in the continuation of poverty; employers who pay substandard and marginal wages; agricultural groups that refuse to pay living wages or to maintain decent housing for migrant farm workers; racists who understand the connection between maintaining the fiction of white supremacy and the reality of low wages. Yet, since such groups exercise a strong political influence in the society which is being called upon to support the "war," they get unmentioned in the propoganda.¹⁹

For liberals who feel this way to conclude that the welfare state is a sham that should be abandoned until we can really solve the country's problems would be terribly self-defeating. Instead, these liberals want to use the welfare state as the initial stage of a social program that will become more extensively and explicitly concerned with redistribution of income. Only when America has become a more equal society can the underlying political and economic causes that create the misery of the poor be removed; until those causes are removed, the alleviation of poverty will be an endless and

Keyserling, " New Republic, 10 November 1958, p. 15. See also James Tobin, "It Can Be Done! Conquering Poverty in the U.S. by 1976," New Republic, 3 June 1967, pp. 16-17.

¹⁹ Paul Jacobs, "America's Schizophrenic View of the Poor," Nation 29 September 1967, p. 197.

and fruitless task.²⁰

Irving Kristol has been the most persistent critic of modern American egalitarianism in recent years. His arguments, right or wrong, usually bring out the most important questions at the bottom of the redistribution controversy. He asserts, for example, that inequality in the distribution of income is much less severe than is commonly supposed, or rather that the reasons for inequality are much less sinister than often supposed. The American distribution of income is so "center-heavy" that those in the 80th or even the 95th percentile live comfortably, but not lavishly, he argues. Because it is so lonely at the top, efforts to redistribute income from the rich quickly wind up imposing heavy taxes on those whom no one would consider wealthy. Furthermore, much of the variation in income is attributable to causes most people would accept as plausible and legitimate. It is hardly unjust, Kristol says, for people's earnings to gradually increase throughout their careers, and then diminish sharply in retirement. But the interpretation of income distribution statistics often fails to distinguish the poor from those who have their careers ahead of them or substantial savings behind them.²¹

²⁰ Ibid.; Richard Cloward, "The War on Poverty: Are the Poor Left Out?" Nation, 2 August 1965, p. 55; Irving Louis Horowitz, "The Operatives Make Their Play," Nation, 15 January 1973, p. 74.

²¹ Kristol, Two Cheers for Capitalism, pp. 198-201.

Kristol offers two reasons why liberal egalitarians are so preoccupied with this limited and understandable degree of inequality. According to Kristol, liberals are not that interested in equality or in the poor, but find the issue of inequality appealing because it provides a basis for venting other grievances they have. One such grievance is the moral rather than the material shortcomings of a bourgeois society. Liberals seek a more ennobling life than the one geared to profit, leisure, and security. Rather than elaborate a moral critique of modern society, a difficult and hazardous task, liberals take up the cause of the poor in a critique of the material conditions of society that is both easier to make and to understand. The severity of this critique is unrelated to the real problems of poverty and inequality, says Kristol. Liberals who define the problem of inequality in purely relative terms guarantee that no redistributive policies could ever issue in acceptable social arrangements. "Is such a view primarily interested in the material well-being of poor people or the moral well-being of liberal reformers?" asks Kristol.²² The plausibility of the latter can be seen clearly in Sweden, where rhetoric about inequality has become completely disconnected from the realities of inequality. Kristol writes:

The demand for greater equality has less to do with any specific inequities of bourgeois society than with the fact that bourgeois society is seen as itself

²²Ibid., p. 217.

inequitable because it is based on a deficient conception of the common good. The recent history of Sweden is living proof of this proposition. The more egalitarian Sweden becomes--and it is already about as egalitarian as it is ever likely to be--the more enrages are its intellectuals, the more guilt-ridden and uncertain are its upper-middle classes, the more alienated are its college-educated youth. Though Swedish politicians and journalists cannot bring themselves to believe it, it should be obvious by now that there are no reforms that are going to placate the egalitarian impulse in Swedish society. Each reform only invigorates the impulse the more, because the impulse is not, in the end, about equality at all but about the quality of life in bourgeois society.²³

The second of Kristol's explanations for egalitarianism is also unrelated to equality, at least as it pertains to rich and poor. Kristol says that, given the social status of most liberal egalitarians, whose income and importance is often incommensurate, in their own eyes, with their education and talents, such people resent the power of the corporate sector's managerial class. From the intellectual's point of view, these people are narrow and unimaginative, working in careers that place a premium on such qualities. Whatever else the egalitarian agenda is supposed to accomplish, Kristol says, it will surely effect the transfer of resources, power, and prestige from the private sector to the public sector. It is in the public sector that these egalitarians feel they have their only real chance to do important things and be important people.

²³ Ibid., pp. 179-180.

The redistribution of wealth serves as a pretext for the redistribution of power.²⁴

Liberals and other defenders of the liberal agenda have argued that Kristol's argument is ad hominem, and that neoconservatives generally have distorted the liberal position for polemical advantage. In his book on the neoconservatives Peter Steinfels argues that their argument turns on the contention that equality of opportunity is a wholly different concern from equality of results. In fact, he argues, the situation is more complicated--the first concern of liberals is alleviating poverty, but without placing some limits on the inequality in American society, the poor will never have a fighting chance. Kristol and the other neoconservatives are far too sanguine about the realization of equality of opportunity, according to Steinfels. Liberals have a more accurate perception of the way in which America continues to resist equality of opportunity, and appreciate that inequality may only submit to more assertive egalitarian policies.²⁵

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 183-184, 224.

²⁵ Peter Steinfels, The Neoconservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America's Politics (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), pp. 215-216, 231-232; Walzer, "In Defense of Equality," pp. 107-123; Herbert J. Gans, More Equality (New York: Random House, 1968; Vintage Press, 1974), p. 24; Wilson, "Liberalism and Purpose," p. 75; Daniel Bell, "On Meritocracy and Equality," Public Interest 29 (Fall 1972): 33-39.

So egalitarianism is, from the liberal's perspective, a necessary component of liberalism if the overriding goals of benevolent action are to be achieved. But the question of whether egalitarianism has the status of an autonomous goal in liberal thought, worthy of pursuit for its own sake, remains. Liberals themselves are divided and confused by this issue. On the one hand, there is discomfort among liberals about being confined to the pursuit of benevolence. This feeling was well expressed at the first ADA convention:

[We reject] the view that government's only responsibility is to prevent people from starving or freezing to death. We believe it is the function of government to lift the level of human existence. It is the job of government to widen the chance for development of individual personalities. It is not enough for society to guarantee the physical survival of its inhabitants; it must also, ²⁶nourish the dignity of and individual human being.

At the same time, the pragmatist side of the liberal soul is uncomfortable with the vague and expansive agenda suggested by such a critique. Liberals who pride themselves on realism, who feel that this quality distinguishes them from left-wing ideologues, cannot easily embrace a program that seeks to "lift the level of human existence". As James Nuechterlein points out, liberals are dissatisfied with the tepid conclusions to which their analysis often points, but

²⁶Wyatt address to First National ADA Convention, ADA Papers, Series 4, number 9.

are unsure how far they want to go beyond minimal welfare state goals.²⁷

Liberals' mixed feelings about prosperity further complicate the effort to understand liberals' goals. At the end of World War II, liberals insisted that a massive depression, worse than the thirties', would be the consequence of peace. This catastrophe could be avoided only by a dramatic expansion of the New Deal. Despite the repeated failures to enact their desired welfare legislation, however, the economy expanded steadily and strongly in the aftermath of the war. Liberals were ultimately forced to acknowledge, with some sheepishness, that the patient had recovered while ignoring the doctor's advice.²⁸

When the economy continued to soar in the fifties, liberals were forced to abandon their argument that the liberal agenda was necessary to avoid economic disaster. The argument that replaced it said that prosperity now made it possible for society to secure all the things liberals wanted it to have.

²⁷Nuechterlein, "Schlesinger," pp. 39-40; Kaufman, The Radical Liberal, pp. 11-12; Paul Seabury, "Gideon's Army and Moynihan's Pros," New Republic, 19 March 1966, p. 25.

²⁸"The Peril of Victory," New Republic, 20 August 1945, pp. 203-204; Leo Barnes, "The Anatomy of Full Employment," Nation, 26 May 1945, pp. 593-597; "The Economic Outlook," Nation, 19 July 1947, pp. 59-60; "Good News is No News," New Republic, 4 February 1946, p. 144; Robert Lekachman, "Fashions in Liberalism," Nation, 20 September 1965, pp. 62-66.

In an age of affluence we no longer ought to fear making value-judgments rather than cost-judgments. If ballet is worth having, as we earlier decided public libraries were worth having, go ahead and provide for ballet, even though there is not sufficient "demand" to make it "economic." This attitude can obviously be extended from ballet to beautifying the countryside, and in a dozen other different directions. With all this wealth we can afford to try.²⁹

All of liberalism's designs for a better society came to rest on the assumption of continued and growing prosperity. "Rising prosperity was welfare capitalism's secular equivalent of grace."³⁰

But as heavily as they depended on prosperity, liberals could not easily bring themselves to accept it.

Affluence is an aborted, misdirected abundance; it produces waste and trivia, poverty and disaffection; it is dedicated to private wealth and public squalor. The affluent tend to be mindless, shut off from reality, lost in a surfeit of silly possessions and sillier pursuits.³¹

So while liberalism needed prosperity, it feared it--prosperity corrupted popular tastes and made the people unreceptive to liberals' efforts to use our economic strength in the service of public goals. As Nuechterlein argues:

²⁹Harold Malmgren, "The Economy: A Case for Efficient Planning," New Republic, 7 November 1964, p. 47.

³⁰Clecak, Crooked Paths, p. 67. See also address by Walter P. Reuther to the ADA convention, ADA papers, Series 4, number 88.

³¹"Forgotten in Abundance?" Nation, 1 February 1965, p. 97.

A prosperous capitalist economy is one that, for liberals, is always in danger of losing its political and moral soul. If capitalism works too well, it dulls the appetite for liberal reform. It leaves people content with diverse, non-public leadership and insufficiently critical of the moral workings of society. From the liberal perspective, an America in (non-inflationary) economic troubles is more likely to recognize its enemies--the capitalist elite--and less inclined to demand the kind of redistributive and regulatory governmental activism that liberals identify with social health.³²

Arthur Schlesinger attempted to formulate an approach that would allow liberalism to accommodate postwar prosperity, but neither he nor any other liberal pursued it seriously. According to Schlesinger, New Deal liberalism was concerned with "quantitative" issues--securing the necessities of life for all Americans. In prosperous times, he said, liberalism must become "qualitative," concerned with such issues as "education, health, equal opportunity, [and] community planning." These will "determine the quality of civilization," they will "make the difference between defeat and opportunity, between frustration and fulfillment, in the everyday lives of average persons."³³ How, precisely, qualitative liberalism is to differ from what has gone before is never made clearer than this. If even health and education are on its agenda, then the differences from older

³²Nuechterlein, "The Liberal World," p. 23.

³³Schlesinger, The Politics of Hope, p. 92; The Crisis of Confidence, pp. 246-247; A Thousand Days, p. 99; "The Challenge of Abundance," Reporter, 3 May 1956, p. 9.

liberalism are subtle indeed. Qualitative liberalism stands, not as a clarification of liberalism, but only as further evidence of liberalism's intellectual disarray.

Two things are clear about liberalism's goals. First, liberals seek to do good works, to be efficacious agents of benevolence in the modern economy. Secondly, liberals are not satisfied with just this goal; they seek to do and be something more. This something more is quite unclear, however. There is no consensus among liberal intellectuals about the relationship between egalitarianism and liberalism, or on the limits of the welfare state agenda. Nor is it readily clear why many liberals feel it is necessary to go beyond altruism, especially when their efforts to describe where are so incomplete. One is entitled to suspect that benevolence is an unsatisfactory goal because it may readily be attained, especially in a prosperous economy, and, once attained, will render liberals themselves politically irrelevant. A more demanding--and ambiguous--agenda promises liberals a long future prodding America's conscience. It is not unfair to ask whether at least some liberals are interested in doing good, as opposed to accomplishing good, and would view the actual conquest of poverty with mixed feelings.

CHAPTER THREE

RENDERING THE WELFARE STATE

Given the charitable goals of liberalism, how do liberals understand the sort of social policies needed to realize these goals? The starting point for liberal thinking about public policy is that the government has a duty to secure every citizen a decent standard of living. "The prevention of poverty, disease, and ignorance is as much a responsibility of representative government as the prevention of crime."¹ The government must seek to assure adequate levels of income, without requiring the poor to liquidate their assets, and without making compliance with demeaning and intrusive regulations the price of assistance.²

Liberals' writings leave little doubt that welfare must ultimately be the responsibility of the government. It is impossible to devise private insurance or savings arrangements for something like health care that will be practical

¹"State of the Union," New Republic, 10 January 1949, p. 92.

²Richard A. Cloward and Frances Fox Piven, "The Weight of the Poor: A Strategy to End Poverty," Nation, 2 May 1966, p. 511; Robert Theobald, "Abundance: Threat or Promise," Nation, 11 May 1963, p. 403.

for the improverished. Similarly, private charity has a very limited capacity to alleviate poverty. Voluntary contributions fail to materialize because individuals suspect that their generosity will not be matched by others, rendering their sacrifice, however significant personally, trivial compared to the social evils to be alleviated. Only a welfare state relying on tax payments assures all the citizens of a democracy that their contributions will attain the critical mass required for really helping the poor. Liberals have also argued that excessive reliance on private charity leads to a Balkanized welfare state where efforts are hampered for the lack of central coordination and clear priorities.³

I

The assumption by the government of the central role in securing minimally decent standards of living necessarily leaves government with many politically difficult decisions about how to acquire and allocate the welfare state's funds. The position of modern liberalism on the funding of the welfare state is relatively clear and unequivocal. The welfare state is best financed through

³Michael H. Alderman, "Why We Need Medicare," New Republic, 26 December 1964, pp. 17-19; Philip Green, "Two Cheers for the State," Nation, 26 November 1949, pp. 506-607; Leo J. Linder, "Which Bill is Best?" Nation, 28 May 1960, pp. 467-468.

revenues collected from a progressive income tax. "Isn't the burden of the country's aged population a burden upon all of us? And shouldn't we all carry the burden in proportion to our ability to carry it?"⁴ The first question is already answered by the decision to include support for the aged--or the sick, homeless, ill-educated, or jobless--in the list of welfare state responsibilities. The second rhetorical question reflects the liberal belief that the more fortunate citizens have a social obligation to help the poor. Any scheme other than progressive taxation forces the poor to share a large burden of their own assistance, a foolish and self-defeating arrangement.⁵

One does not have to be a Marxist, or attribute Marxism to liberals, to suppose that if the guideline for funding the welfare state is from each according to his abilities, the allocative principle would be to each according to his needs. Certainly the general thrust of liberal thought, with its stress on the plight and the needs of the poor, is compatible with this principle. And it is possible to find liberals advocating specific programs or administrative procedures that go to extraordinary lengths to locate and help the needy. Both Nation and New

⁴Linder, pp. 467-468.

⁵"Social Security Redux," New Republic, 15 April 1978, p. 6; Keyserling, "Eggheads and Politics," p. 16.

Republic criticized an Office of Economic Opportunity program of low interest loans to needy entrepreneurs. The administration of the program was geared to helping businessmen with good credit records and demonstrated management ability--who nonetheless were extremely poor and could find no other source of financing. Both magazines suggested that the government should take more risks in the interests of realizing its social welfare goals.⁶

As a rule, however, liberals have favored dispersing the welfare state's benefits to targeting them. One reason why liberals prefer to make more people eligible for welfare state benefits, rather than concentrating on the neediest, is the administrative simplicity of a universal or near-universal system. Stringent eligibility criteria can only be administered by a powerful and intrusive bureaucracy, and may have the perverse effect of forcing people to be, or seem, poorer than necessary in order to qualify for benefits. Though more inclusive programs have higher costs initially, they are less disruptive and expensive in the long run.⁷

⁶"Small Business Loans," New Republic, 24 September 1966, p. 9; Mark Levy, "Putting The Poor Out of Business," Nation, 12 June 1967, pp. 750-753. See also, "Not Enough," Nation, 4 January 1964, pp. 1-2.

⁷David Sanford, "Care for the Not-So-Poor," New Republic, 4 June 1966, p. 8; T.R.B., "The War on Poverty," New Republic, 14 March 1964, p. 2; Richard Lee Strout, "Paying for the Right to Life," New Republic, 23 November 1968, pp. 15-16.

A second reason some liberals have given for assisting relatively large numbers of people is that it is shabby for the government to force people to prove they are poor. "The needs test, which amounts to a secular vow of poverty, is such a demeaning requirement, psychologically, that it could not have been better calculated to dissuade the public from availing itself of the help offered."⁸ The needs test, or means test, reinforces the power of the upper classes and the dependency of the poor, an apparent contravention of the purposes of the welfare state.

[Under the means test,] before aid could be gained, the humble recipient must in effect file a pauper's statement, whereupon the kindly upper classes would permit the government to bestow largesse through tax funds. The Social Security Act of 1935 knocked out the philosophy of the means test and substituted the idea of social insurance, with rich and poor alike paying basic taxes and receiving basic protection against a natural human hazard.⁹

The most important reason why liberals have favored broadly allocative programs is the belief that such programs will guarantee broad political support for the welfare state. Liberals have acknowledged, obliquely, that helping the poor may be politically unpopular. When New Republic calls federal

⁸Gerald Krefitz, "Health Care for the Aged (Progress Report)," Nation, 4 February 1961, p. 100.

⁹Willard Shelton, "Portrait of a Conservative," New Republic, 4 April 1949, p. 20. See also, "Consecrated Tory--Robert A. Taft: The Poor are Always With Us," New Republic, 5 May 1952.

housing programs confined to the poor divisive, it is clear that such a program would distinguish a small group of beneficiaries from a large group of contributors. The resulting political calculus is straightforward. "Presumably those policies will win the public heart which are most nearly universal in their promise of benefits."¹⁰ There is no reason to fear antagonizing doctors with a medical insurance plan for the elderly; the beneficiaries number in the millions and vote faithfully.¹¹

A clear example of this liberal belief that expanding the list of welfare state beneficiaries would deepen political support for the welfare state is the idea, advanced by various liberals, that directing funds to the working poor will alleviate tension between this group and the non-working poor on welfare. It is understandable, their argument runs, that people who work in low-paying, disagreeable jobs should resent that welfare recipients have incomes approaching their own. But the working poor are the natural allies of the welfare state; their claims for relief are nearly as strong as those made by people who can't work at all. To end this unnecessary antagonism among America's

¹⁰ Robert Lekachman, "What Works, What Doesn't, Nation, 11 May 1974, p. 591.

¹¹ Catherine Bauer, "The Middle Class Needs Houses Too," pp. 19-20; "Wave of the Future," Nation, 9 April 1960, p. 306.

least fortunate citizens, liberals have proposed schemes for directing money to the near-poor. A wage supplement plan, or special tax and Social Security provisions, or George McGovern's demogrant program, would have smoothed over these bitter feelings, and oriented the thinking of a large bloc of voters towards viewing themselves as beneficiaries of redistribution rather than contributors to it.¹²

The Social Security system presents liberals with a particularly nasty dilemma. There is no discernible liberal support for the Social Security payroll tax. It is regressive, and the liberal approach to funding the welfare state is more in harmony with funding Social Security through general revenues raised through the progressive income tax. But such a shift may have fearful consequences. The Social Security system has enjoyed remarkable popular support since 1935 because, under the payroll tax system, Americans had strong and unapologetic claims to their benefits. Social Security recipients were not regarded as being on welfare, and they did not regard themselves that way. Congress was not called upon to assess the claims of the elderly alongside those of dozens of other needs in the budgetary process. Any shift to general revenue financing could dilute the proprietary claim that recipients now make, and presage the

¹²Richard A. Cloward and Frances Fox Piven, "The Poor Against Themselves, Nation, 25 November 1968, pp. 558-562; Dennis Suggan, "Still Forgotten: The Working Poor," Nation, 9 June 1969, pp. 724-726; Lekachman, "What Works," p. 591.

introduction of a needs test into the Social Security system. Distasteful as the payroll tax is, liberals are inclined to view it as the lesser evil.¹³

In the 1960s liberals, and the nation, rediscovered poverty, and emphasized the precarious condition of those whom economic growth could not rescue. With attention focused on special government programs for what were called the "hard core" poor, some liberals began to voice misgivings about the indiscriminating largesse of the welfare state. According to a Nation article, "Experience shows that the poor have good reason to be apprehensive about programs formed in their name by the powerful."¹⁴ The government has become very effective at providing benefits for organized interest groups, such as labor, but does not respond to the unorganized poor. A New Republic article charges that whether or not a person is eligible for government benefits seems to be randomly determined. There is no intuitively plausible guideline determining whether or how much money is paid out, and as a result the poor resent and fear the whole welfare system.

¹³"Revising Social Security," New Republic, 24 June 1972, p. 9; "State of the Union," New Republic, 10 January 1949, pp. 11-12; Schlesinger, The Coming of the New Deal, pp. 308-309; Merton C. Bernstein, "What Future for Social Security?" New Republic, 9 January 1965, pp. 10-11; "Contributory Social Insurance," ADA papers, Series 4, number 25.

¹⁴Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, "What Chance for Black Power?" New Republic, 30 March 1968, p. 21.

Social programs that are generally perceived as universal in coverage tend to flourish in public favor and grow in financial outlay. By grim contrast, efforts to help minorities, unless they aid wounded war veterans, the blind, or the victims of tornados and earthquakes, arouse firece opposition; survive, if survive they do, in perpetually desparate financial straits, and afford standing temptation for exploitation as succulent political issues by conservative demagogues.¹⁵

Liberals have examined federal programs for education and found them perversely ineffective for helping the poor. Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was supposed to provide money for the "educationally disadvantaged." But the actual administration of Title I paid little attention to directing aid to the neediest children. Title I aid was often given to districts with only a few disadvantaged students, and federal officials barely tried to make sure that these funds were not diverted by local officials to pay for their own educational priorities. Some liberals also began to express doubts as to whether government funding for higher education did not have the same tendency to assist the self-sufficient at the expense of the needy. Though the poor were surely taxed to pay for state universities and government loan programs, the chances of their children going to college and benefitting from them were much smaller than middle-class families.¹⁶

¹⁵Lekachman, "What Works," p. 590; Rep. Martha W. Griffiths, "The High Cost of Inequality," Nation, 10 December 1973, pp. 623-626.

¹⁶"Poor Children," New Republic, 22 November 1969, pp. 9-11; "The Disadvantages of Being Poor," Nation 1 December

A similar liberal assessment about programs for solving urban problems, especially housing, developed in the sixties. Various articles in liberal periodicals raise a common complaint. Government programs intended, ostensibly, to assist the poor, are inevitably distorted by political forces to help the well-to-do, often at the expense of the poor. The whole purpose of the Model Cities program was to demonstrate the benefits of the intensely concentrated expenditure of federal funds, but politics dictated dozens of cities receive much smaller grants, with correspondingly inconsequential effects. Government loans and loan guarantees had a pivotal role in facilitating "white flight" from the cities to the suburbs and the resulting deterioration of the urban economic base. When the government steps in to try to correct the mess it helped create, its programs, through inadvertance or cynical design, routinely provide more tangible benefits to real estate developers and construction firms than to Americans in need of decent housing.¹⁷

One can see evidence of a similar liberal revisionism in the assessment of income transfer programs. Why is it, one article asks, that unemployment compensation

1969, p. 590; W. Lee Hansen and Burton A. Weisbrod, "The Equity Fiction," New Republic, 13 September 1969, pp. 23-24; P. Nelson Reid, "Financing Higher Education," New Republic, 12 June 1971, pp. 13-14.

¹⁷"Living Room," New Republic, 19 December 1970, p. 8; "Suburban Snobbery," New Republic, 26 June 1971, p. 8; "Subsidized Housing," New Republic, 20 July 1968, pp. 10-11; "New Housing Start?" New Republic, 13 March 1965, p. 8.

is politically uncontroversial, while Aid to Families with Dependent Children is perpetually under attack, its beneficiaries stigmatized in the crudest terms? The former is a welfare program for the middle class, states the author, while the latter is a welfare program for the poor, and in the logic of our welfare state, helping people who need it most is always the questionable proposition. This logic, which dictates that government assistance to the very poor must generally be an incidental byproduct of programs that aid a much larger and wealthier group, distorts the functioning of the welfare state, causing the government to expend vast amounts of economic and political capital to attain
 18
 very modest goals.

In the wake of the 1980 election, some liberals have been trying to reformulate their approach to welfare state policy. A few have offered the obvious suggestion that liberals unambiguously promote a more discriminating welfare state, one that does more for the poor and less, at least in terms of providing goods and services, for the non-poor. These suggestions have been ignored where they have not been derided. It will be an extremely delicate task--it may be an impossible task--for liberals to regenerate

¹⁸Eliot Marshall, "Unemployment Comp is Middle-Class Welfare," New Republic, 19 February 1977, pp. 16-18; Eveline M. Burns, "The Poor Need Money," Nation, 7 June 1965, pp. 613-614; Lekachman, "What Works," p. 590.

political support for the welfare state on a basis different from economic self-interest.¹⁹

II

Getting money to the people who need it is one welfare state problem. Seeing that money, once rightly directed, actually conduces to the attainment of the welfare state goals, is another. Kindness has become a more ambitious and complex virtue in our age than it once was.

At the time when Saint Francis impulsively gave his fine clothes to a beggar, nobody seems to have been very interested in what happened to the beggar. Was he rehabilitated? Did he open a small business? Or was he found the next day, naked again, in an Assisi gutter, having traded the clothes for a flagon of Orvieto? These were not the sort of questions that engaged the medieval mind. The twentieth century has developed a more ambitious definition of what it means to help somebody.²⁰

The New Deal had approached poverty as a transitional problem. Men and women prepared to contribute to American society needed only the guarantee of a decent living to be self-sufficient. Efforts to apply this approach in the postwar boom left liberals feeling that they were "running out of poor people." "Unlike the ambitious

¹⁹"Liberals and Inflation," New Republic, 20 January 1979, pp. 5-6, 8-13; Gelman, "Liberal Agenda," p. 82.

²⁰Quoted in George F. Will, The Pursuit of Happiness: And Other Sobering Thoughts (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 196.

immigrants of the eighteen-nineties or the politically unemployed of the nineteen-thirties, the poor of the fifties were all too often a demoralized and inarticulate minority who in many cases had inherited their poverty and passively accepted it as a permanent condition."²¹ Assisting this kind of poor person was a challenge for which liberals were not intellectually prepared, and for which the government was not functionally prepared.²²

This is no liberal consensus as to the potential for self-sufficiency among today's poor. One article can assert that, "If jobs were available,...most of those now on welfare,...would be self-supporting."²³ Another article, published the same year says that 99 per cent of those on welfare are "new born infants, deserted mothers, and disease-ridden old people beyond the possibility of employment."²⁴ It sometimes seems that the liberal view of the poor changes for polemical reasons. There is a tendency to emphasize

²¹Schlesinger, The Politics of Hope, pp. 245-246.

²²Daniel A. Satter, "West Side Story: Home is Where the Welfare Check Comes," New Republic, 2 July 1966, pp. 15-19; Wildavsky, "Government and the People," pp. 26.

²³Melville J. Ulmer, "Waiting for Welfare," New Republic, 13 November 1971, pp. 10-11.

²⁴Sen. Ernest F. Hollings, "The Reality of American Hunger," Nation, 26 April 1971, p. 520. See also Burns, "The Poor Need Money," p. 613; Jencks, "Slums and Schools--I," p. 21.

the poor's incapacities when defending transfer payments and their potential when job training and education programs are under attack.²⁵

For the most part, however, liberal confusion about the poor seems genuine rather than calculated. The relatively simple approach of the New Deal is no longer adequate. Liberals are unsure what to do for the modern poor, because they are unsure whether these poor, America's "underclass," are impoverished because they lead disordered lives or lead disordered lives because they are impoverished. To the extent liberals have tried to take the most optimistic view of the poor, they often found themselves trying hardest to help those least likely to benefit from their efforts. As described by Aaron Wildavsky, this inclination has worked to make a successful poverty program an impossibility: Any program that actually helps some people compete in the labor market or to become community leaders comes under suspicion for having selected clients who were not the neediest available.²⁶

A particularly difficult problem for liberals is the possibility that some beneficiaries of the welfare state will become dependent on it, that welfare will not have the effect of re-empowering self-sufficient people to care

²⁵ Harry Lipman, "'Workfare' and Welfare," Nation, 20 August 1977, pp. 142-143; Jencks, "Johnson v. Poverty," p. 17; Melville J. Ulmer, "Work and Welfare," New Republic, 3 July 1971, pp. 12-14.

²⁶ Wildavsky, p. 27.

for themselves, but of transforming capable adults into unmotivated recipients. Though conservatives have done most of the complaining about welfare recipients' sense of self-reliance, liberals have acknowledged that there is a real danger. Schlesinger said that New Dealers were concerned that their programs were making some Americans less capable of providing for themselves, and Richard Cloward, writing in Nation, says that the modern welfare system promotes the disintegration of families by "substituting check-writing machines for male wage earners."²⁷

One troubling manifestation of the dependency problem is the implicit tax on the earnings of welfare recipients--the portion of the dollar they earn that is offset by a loss of welfare benefits. These "taxes" can be quite high in individual programs, and a family receiving several kinds of aid can face a cumulative implicit tax of well over 100%, a powerful disincentive to getting off welfare. There is a simple solution to the implicit tax--create lenient rules about how much people can earn before they begin to surrender their welfare benefits. This solution has an obvious political problem, however. The consequence of lowering the implicit tax is including millions of new recipients in the welfare system. The regulations that allow the welfare

²⁷ Schlesinger, The Coming of the New Deal, p. 275; Cloward, "The War on Poverty," p. 55.

family to earn income without losing benefits also make the family that had been getting by on its earnings alone eligible for welfare for the first time. The decision to explicitly accept this expansion of the welfare system as a consequence of making the welfare system rational was the core of George McGovern's 1972 "demogrant" proposal, first outlined by Yale economist James Tobin in New Republic. That this idea did so much to label McGovern an extremist, contributing to his defeat, has caused many liberals to lose interest in the "dependency trap" created by the implicit tax.²⁸

In Wealth and Poverty, George Gilder has taken the problem of dependency very seriously. He argues that while economic growth under capitalism has always required risk-taking and exertion, the network of welfare programs discourages economic growth and participation in the economy by the marginally poor.

The moral hazards of current programs are clear. Unemployment compensation promotes unemployment. Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) makes more families dependent and fatherless. Disability insurance in all its multiple forms encourages the promotion of small ills into temporary disabilities and partial disabilities into total and permanent ones. Social security payments may discourage concern for the aged and dissolve the links between generations. Programs of insurance

²⁸ Robert J. Lampman, "What Does It Do For the Poor?-- A New Test for National Policy," in The Great Society, ed. Ginzberg and Solow, pp. 77-78; James Tobin, "It Can Be Done," pp. 17-18; Robert J. Lampman, "What We Know About Poverty," Nation, 9 December 1968, pp. 625-626; Griffiths, "Inequality," p. 626.

against low farm prices and high energy costs create a glut of agricultural commodities and a dearth of fuels. Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) subsidies for government make-work enhance a feeling of dependence on the state without giving the sometimes bracing experience of genuine work. All means-tested programs (designed exclusively for the poor) promote the value of being "poor" (the credential of poverty) and thus perpetuate poverty.²⁹

Poverty is an evil, says Gilder, but the very fact that it is so unpalatable points the way out of poverty.

The most serious fraud is committed not by members of the welfare culture, but by the creators of it, who conceal for the poor, both adults and children, the most fundamental realities of their lives: that to live well and escape poverty they will have to keep their families together at all costs and work harder than the classes above them. In order to succeed, the poor need most of all the spur of their poverty.³⁰

Assuming continued immigration, "there will be poverty in America for generations to come," says Gilder. All previous generations of immigrants were initially poor, but rose through hard work, the strength of the nuclear family, and faith in themselves and the future. A welfare system that penalizes work, promotes the dissolution of families, and encourages the poor to think of themselves as victims, to concentrate on their liabilities rather than their strengths, destroys all of the forces which have led millions of Americans out of poverty, Gilder argues.³¹

²⁹George Gilder, Wealth and Poverty (New York: Basic Books, 1981), p. 111; pp. 109-113.

³⁰Ibid., p. 118.

³¹Ibid., pp. 64-74.

With the best of intentions, we have created a welfare system that perpetuates misery rather than helps end it. According to Gilder:

Welfare, by far the largest economic influence in the ghetto, exerts a constant, seductive, erosive pressure on the marriages and work habits of the poor, and over the years, in poor communities, it fosters a durable "welfare culture"....The fundamental fact in the lives of the poor in most parts of America today is that the wages of common labor are far below the benefits of AFDC, Medicaid, food stamps, public housing, public defenders, leisure time, and all the other goods and services of the welfare state. As long as this situation persists, real family poverty will tend to get worse, particularly in areas congested with the poor.³²

Gilder's conclusions about welfare reform are stark, and certainly unpalatable to liberals. Strict enforcement of welfare eligibility is helpful, but does not really solve the welfare problem. Gilder writes:

There is no such thing as a good system of artificial income maintenance. The crucial goal should be to restrict the system as much as possible, by making it unattractive and even a bit demeaning.³³

Liberals who have written on this subject have, for the most part, dismissed fears such as Gilder's as unrealistic. They draw on a variety of sources in an effort to show that government support does not render individuals incapable of supporting themselves. One article cites the experience

³²Ibid., p. 122.

³³Ibid., p. 117.

of Western European nations, where relatively generous assistance systems co-exist with very low unemployment rates. Another points to one state's experimental program where welfare case-workers were given unusually light case loads; the extra attention given to clients resulted in so many of them leaving the welfare rolls that the program paid for itself. Schlesinger even quotes Winston Churchill's doubts that welfare "will sap the vitality and self-reliance of our race. There will be quite enough grindstone in human life to keep us keen."³⁴

The argument that welfare does not always and certainly lead to dependence is well taken. Even Gilder acknowledges that most people who need welfare need it for only a short time, and resume supporting themselves as quickly as possible. But there is a more basic theoretical difficulty with the liberal approach to the question. I found no evidence of any consideration by liberals of an important phenomenon, the case of one immigrant group after another in America from poverty to the middle class in the absence of the welfare state. Such a fact is not a pleasant one for liberals to consider, suggesting that welfare may not be necessary or even wise in some circumstances. The

³⁴Margaret S. Gordon, "Failure of Unemployment Insurance," Nation, 7 June 1965, p. 612; "Goldwater's Law," New Republic, 1 February 1964, pp. 4-5; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Roosevelt, vol. 1: The Crisis of the Old Order: 1919-1933 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 179.

neglect of this fact argues that liberals do not have a theory about economic growth; they are interested in redistribution, directly or indirectly, but have taken the economic growth that lubricates redistribution for granted.³⁵

To the extent that liberals have considered economic growth, their thought has concentrated on the political stimulation of the demand for economic growth. This demand is, of course, the focus of Keynesian economics, or at least those portions of Keynesianism assimilated by liberals. Liberals have also endorsed the most political aspects of the War on Poverty, such as community action programs, with the argument that political action is the best way for the poor to receive an adequate income.³⁶ The picture that emerges is of a faceless economic system, a "black box," that will generate more goods in response to political pressure. But goods and services are not produced by an economic system, but through the ingenuity and industry of men and women. Liberals' lack of interest in the relationship between social policy and productivity is a serious dereliction of intellectual duty.

³⁵Gilder, pp. 52, 125-126.

³⁶Roger H. Davidson, "The Politics of Anti-Poverty," Nation, 24 February 1969, pp. 233-237; Cloward and Piven, "The Weight of the Poor," pp. 510-517; Richard A. Cloward and Frances Fox Piven, "Birth of a Movement," Nation, 8 May 1967, pp. 584-585.

III

What we have learned from the experience of the postwar welfare state, an experience that included a great deal of controversy about the government's role in alleviating distress, and a significant expansion of that role in the 1960's? Before examining liberals' assessments of the actual practice of the welfare state we should outline the critique of recent welfare state policies. One of the propositions in the case against the modern welfare state is that it has led to explosive growth of the public sector, and that government activity at this level cannot be sustained, economically or politically. Roger Freeman calculated that if the government budget grew at the same rate between 1972 and 2000 as it did between 1952 and 1972, 36% of the work force would be in the public sector, and government would spend 70% of the Gross National Product, compared to 36% in 1972.³⁷

A second assertion is that welfare state efforts were, by and large, a disappointment, that America did not get its money's worth. Lance Liebman has summarized the variations on this theme. One view is that people had rising expectations, which ran far ahead of the actual progress of

³⁷Clecak, Crooked Paths, p. 73. See also Levitan and Taggart, The Promise of Greatness, pp. 20-34.

government programs. A second contention is that the government took on some tasks, such as training for the least employable, which no one really knew how to do, and for which there may in fact be no successful approach. Money spent in these areas inevitably leads to disappointments. A third argument is that the public sector is inherently costly and inefficient, and delegating additional responsibilities to it only worsens the problem. Finally, the welfare agenda required a threshold investment of resources, financial and political, which the American majority was unwilling to surrender.³⁸

The combination of escalating costs and escalating disappointments had led some to conclude that frustration inheres in the welfare state. Milton Friedman contends simply that the essence of the welfare state is X, a government official, spending money collected from Y, a taxpayer, for the benefit of Z, a recipient. Because X is neither spending his own money nor spending money on himself he has no incentive to economize or to get full value for his costs: Public housing is both expensive and shoddy. Arthur Okun's gentler analysis of the welfare state is only slightly more comforting to liberals. He says that costs and inefficiencies are inevitable in welfare programs, and that the test of a

³⁸Lance Liebman, "Social Intervention in a Democracy," in Ginzberg and Sclow, p. 17. See also Wildavsky, p. 26.

person's commitment to the welfare state is the ratio of costs to benefits he is willing to tolerate. Plausible though this characterization may be, the coupling of liberalism with a tolerance for government costs is less than a public relations coup.³⁹

Liberal intellectuals have, with few exceptions, not even tried to construct a blanket defense of the modern American welfare state. One finds instead a number of critical judgments on various aspects of the welfare state. A New Republic article criticizes the VISTA program as a nice idea ("a domestic Peace Corps") that no one in Washington bothered to think through. As a consequence, there was often very little for the volunteers to do. The rush to enact legislation in the mid-sixties often precluded policy-making sobriety.⁴⁰ The selection of policy goals was often made for inexplicable or less than admirable reasons, liberals have alleged in Nation and New Republic. Limited resources were spent on less than urgent needs, or funds were allocated in

³⁹ Milton and Rose Friedman, Free to Choose (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979), pp. 116-117; Arthur Okun, Equality and Efficiency: The Big Tradeoff (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1975), pp. 88-100.

⁴⁰ Andrew Kopkind, "VISTA on a Cloudy Day," New Republic, 19 March 1966, pp. 17-18; Michael Harrington, Towards a Democratic Left: A Radical Program for a New Majority (New York: Macmillan, 1968; Pelican, 1969), pp. 11-12; James I. Sundquist, "Origins of the War on Poverty," in On Fighting Poverty, ed. Sundquist, pp. 28-29.

in response to political pressure or bureaucratic needs.⁴¹

The literature also shows that liberals have been concerned and indignant about the administrative costs of the welfare state. A sardonic New Republic editorial says that "poverty has been a growth industry"--for social workers and social scientists, who prospered during the War on Poverty. But there is no discernible improvement in the lives of the poor as a result of this enrichment of the poverty industry. Simplify the programs, dispense with the arcane studies and pilot projects, the editorial suggests, and both the poor and the taxpayers will be better off.⁴²

The flaws of bad planning, bad administration, and needless expenses in the welfare state that liberals have acknowledged are not inherent in the welfare state; it is at least possible to imagine more efficient government assistance to the poor. Critics of the welfare state have argued, however, that it suffers from a deeper political problem that no administrative reforms can solve. Once it begins to attend to the problems of poverty, government in a modern democracy becomes subject to demands that distort

⁴¹Ivor Kraft, "Head Start to What?" Nation, 5 September 1966, pp. 179-182; "Domestic Pacification," New Republic, 1 July 1967, p. 7; "Little by Little, Less and Less of OEO," New Republic, 10 December 1966, pp. 10-11.

⁴²"Growth Industry," New Republic, 7 August 1971, p. 9. See also, James Ridgeway, "Simulating Poverty: Input and Output," New Republic, 11 June 1966, pp. 9-10; James Ridgeway, "Rebuilding the Slums," New Republic, 7 January 1967, p. 25.

policies and politics.

As it turns into a rational instrument of public policy, the state opens itself to endless claims, beginning with modest demands of economic, racial and ethnic groups for minimal inclusion and extending to more elaborate claims for a series of broad economic, political and social rights for everyone. These tendencies encourage grandiose rhetoric and heightened expectations on the one side, disappointment and disillusionment on the other.⁴³

Good intentions cannot long withstand powerful political forces, and the welfare state is reordered to accommodate political priorities that have nothing to do with alleviating poverty. David Stockman cites "impact aid" as a case in point. The federal government began the program by assisting 2% of the nation's school districts, those facing additional expenses because of military bases and defense plants in the Korean War. By the 1970s, impact aid was being given to 25% of all school districts enrolling half of the nation's children. The great majority of these districts are quite self-sufficient, but there are strong political pressures to expand the program and none at all for it to contract.⁴⁴ Milton Friedman paraphrases Adam Smith to characterize the welfare state: "An individual who intends only to serve the public interest by fostering government intervention is 'led by an invisible hand to promote'

⁴³Clecak, p. 74.

⁴⁴Stockman, "Social Pork Barrel," p. 15.

private interests 'which was no part of his intention'"⁴⁵

Liberals' reflections on the welfare state have come to similar, but less sweeping and less harsh conclusions. Liberal critiques of the welfare state focus on the way in which the programs originally intended for the poor have been captured by the affluent and powerful. Real estate interests have undermined public housing programs. New Deal programs to secure home mortgages have continued and grown, and now benefit the middle class exclusively. Income transfer programs are starved for funds to help the poor because of the demands of the self-sufficient. And government programs designed to increase the political leverage of the poor come with so many conditions attached that the poor are left even more dependent and powerless.⁴⁶

Another problem liberals have noted is that innovation in welfare policies is stifled by the claims of constituencies profiting from the status quo. According to a New Republic article:

For all intents and purposes welfare reform has been dead for years now. The existing welfare system provides so many benefits to such a broad range of interest groups--farmers, the construction industry, lawyers,

⁴⁵Friedman, Free to Choose, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁶Harry Conn, "Housing: A Vanishing Vision," New Republic, 30 July 1951, pp. 12-13; Alfred Steinberg, "FHA--Profits Before Housing," Nation, 1 January 1949, pp. 11-13; Burns, "The Poor Need Money," p. 614; Piven and Cloward, "What Chance for Black Power?" p. 21.

doctors, and most important of all, bureaucrats--that it probably can never be dismantled. No Congress will radically alter the welfare system until it is in the interest of some equally powerful interest group to do so. Right now the only people who would benefit from a negative income tax are the poor.⁴⁷

Efforts to prune old programs that benefit the non-poor and those to create new ones to help the poor are beset by the same problem: the end of the postwar economic boom has meant that such innovations will have discernible costs, and American government allocates these less adroitly than it allocates benefits.⁴⁸

While acknowledging the problem of rising entitlements, liberals have maintained that the welfare state is only one factor contributing to it. The preoccupation of American culture with material success, and the ubiquitous display of that vision through television, have certainly escalated the demands made on our political economy. An internal dynamic of the American polity has always been groups--factions--pressuring the government for certain economic concessions. To regard the recent wave of demands on the public fisc as a shocking departure from past habits is alarmist.⁴⁹

⁴⁷"Liberals and Inflation," New Republic, 20 January 1979, p. 10.

⁴⁸See, "In Defense of Good Intentions," New Republic, p. 5; Kotz, "Politics of Welfare Reform," p. 20.

⁴⁹"The Federal Government and Social Rights," Intellect, March 1977, p. 294; "The Real Problem," Nation, 10 August 1964, p. 42; Herbert J. Gans, "The Demands of

One of the main purposes of the extended commercial republic was to diffuse class conflict, to encourage people to think of themselves as members of smaller and more numerous groups than the rich or the poor. Critics of the American welfare state assert, however, that it has increased friction among large groups as well as small. Those on the left, in particular, view the efforts of the sixties as attempts to foist middle-class values on the poor. A variety of programs were implemented with the goal of changing the attitudes and habits of the poor in ways more agreeable to the American majority. That the poor resented these efforts, and that the middle class felt its good intentions were being snubbed, were predictable consequences.⁵⁰

More conservative observers emphasize the way in which the welfare state had deepened antagonisms between the poor and those earning slightly more than the poverty level.

From the vantage point of low and middle income working people, the welfare state is grossly unfair. Those who perform the least interesting and lowest paying jobs are asked to contribute most heavily to those who do not work at all.⁵¹

Consciousness II," Nation, 1 March 1971, p. 276. See also Daniel Bell, The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism (New York: Basic Books, 1976), p. 233.

⁵⁰Elinor Graham, "The Politics of Poverty," in Gettleman and Mermelstein, pp. 217-224; Tom Hayden, "Welfare Liberalism and Social Change," in Gettleman and Mermelstein, pp. 478-481; Adam Yarmolinsky, "The Beginnings of OEO," in On Fighting Poverty, ed. Sundquist, pp. 34-35, 38-40.

⁵¹Clecak, p. 90.

The near-poor are particularly aggravated by the sense that government devotes special attention to the very poor, whose improvement is especially unlikely, rather than themselves, who could more plausibly gain from training or education programs.⁵²

The divisiveness of community action programs, which encouraged the "maximum feasible participation" of the poor in designing and implementing poverty programs, has received special attention from the welfare state's critics. The whole idea was included suddenly and with little reflection in the Economic Opportunity Act. To the extent that government officials thought about it at all, they hoped that community action would lead the poor to behave "like PTA delegates, enlisted into the democratic process without really disturbing anybody."⁵³ When some community action programs became aggressively political, the Office of Economic Opportunity's dilemma became acute. To stifle the programs would be to tell the poor that their political participation was welcome, as long as its form and substance were approved by mainstream America. To support all the manifestations of community action would certainly infuriate the taxpayers who were funding it.⁵⁴

⁵² Wildavsky, pp. 27-28; Clecak, pp. 80-81.

⁵³ William C. Selover, "View From Capital Hill: Harassment and Survival," in Sundquist, p. 167.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 183; Martin, Civil Rights, p. 201.

Yet liberal opinion has generally been in favor of community action. An editorial in Nation emphasized the importance of community action as a "feedback channel" for policy-makers. No one can bring the poor's perspective to the evaluation of poverty programs, and no evaluation that excludes their perspective can be adequate. "There is nothing novel about the notion that the beneficiaries of a federal program should be consulted about it. If the poor were called 'farmers' or 'miners' or 'shippers' no questions would be raised."⁵⁵ A New Republic editorial stressed the importance of community action programs in the political revitalization of the ghetto.

The hope for the poverty program was not that it would wipe out poverty over night but that it would begin to revive the instruments of representative government which lie in wreck and ruin in the slums...

What matters most in Watts, on Chicago's west side, in Harlem, is that the federal poverty program reach down and begin the tedious job of constructing democratic institutions in the slum blocks so that these stagnant wastelands can have a voice in governing.⁵⁶

Community action is a necessary check, in this view, against a paternalistic or exploitive poverty program.⁵⁷

⁵⁵"A Voice for the Poor," Nation, 14 June 1965, p. 631.

⁵⁶"When the Poor are Powerless," New Republic, 4 September 1965, p. 7.

⁵⁷"The Poor in Their Place," New Republic, 20 November 1965, p. 7.

Liberal assessments of community action after it had been in existence for a few years were more qualified. Liberals felt that they as well as the designers and administrators of the poverty program, had held unreasonable expectations about the transfer of political power. Savvy politicians did not retire from the field at the sight of a few federally funded community action programs. Powerful local officials did not attain that status without being resourceful, especially in terms of letting Congress know their opinions. The entire community action program quickly faced strong legislative pressure; the upshot was that community action funds were eventually controlled by the very officials the program was supposed to challenge. "Community action appealed to the policy makers in part because it seemed to promise maximum results from a minimum investment of funds."⁵⁸ Experience quickly revealed that such a program was too good to be true.⁵⁹

When community action programs were involved in political conflicts in which the fault lines were essentially racial, the limitations of community action programs were

⁵⁸ Francis Pierce, "Welfare on the Cheap," review of Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding, by Daniel P. Moynihan, in New Republic, 22 February 1969, p. 23.

⁵⁹ Davidson, "The Politics of Anti-Poverty," p. 237; Richard A. Cloward and Richard M. Elman, "The First Congress of the Poor," Nation, 7 February 1966, p. 149; Andrew Kopking, "Poor Politics," New Republic, 25 June 1966, pp. 15-17.

particularly obvious.

The war on poverty has been predicated on the notion that there is such a thing as a community, which can be defined geographically and mobilized for a collective effort to help the poor. This theory has no relationship to reality in the Deep South.⁶⁰

Their perception of the intractability of the racial antagonism caused some liberals to lose their confidence in the application of federal funds to the problems of poverty. Gradual reforms may have been incapable of delivering meaningful changes.⁶¹

A final charge made against the welfare state is that it necessarily occasions a conflict between the raising and meeting of public expectations. The long-time political health of a welfare state program requires that political leaders foster modest expectations about it. They must encourage people to be patient, given the difficulties of designing and implementing programs. It would even be desirable if a program could remain inconspicuous until it was clearly successful. But the experience of the sixties shows that politics is often the enemy of cautious policy making. Opportunities for inaugurating ambitious new projects, such as that given to Lyndon Johnson in 1965, are

⁶⁰ Christopher Jencks, "Accommodating Whites: A New Look at Mississippi," New Republic, 16 April 1966, p. 22.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 19; Andrew Kopkind, "Bureaucracy's Long Arm: Too Heady a Start in Mississippi?" New Republic 21 August 1965, pp. 19-22.

infrequent and short-lived. To move cautiously during these rare moments may be the practical equivalent of not moving at all. Many factors besides Johnson's grandiosity led to the expansive hopes of the Great Society.⁶²

In retrospect, the duty of liberal intellectuals during this period was to temper expectations, to counteract the politicians' necessarily inflated rhetoric. As a rule, however, liberals were as incautious as everyone else. The pages of Nation and New Republic show that liberals clearly understood that the Great Society's rhetorical commitments were going to require much deeper financial commitments than those made in the mid-sixties. Instead of worrying about the long-term dangers of these political debts, liberals were inclined to praise the cleverness that wrested expansive programs from an unwitting and unwilling public. Perhaps they believed that the programs would have become undeniable successes before the taxpayers' patience was exhausted. But liberals really should not be held blameless for or surprised by the eventual backlash against the welfare state.⁶³

⁶²Ginzberg and Solow, "Some Lessons of the 1960's," in Ginzberg and Solow, pp. 212-216; Martin, Civil Rights, p. 184; Sundquist, "Origins of the War on Poverty," pp. 21-28.

⁶³TRB, New Republic, 20 March 1965, p. 2; Linder, "Which Bill is Best?" p. 467; Fred Anderson, "Paying More, Getting Less," New Republic, 17 January 1970, p. 18; Kaufman, Radical Liberal, p. 13.

Liberals are uncertain about what goals they want the welfare state to realize. The minimum agenda of securing decent living standards is unsatisfying, but the more ambitious goals are dangerous and confusing. This confusion about goals reaches into the liberal discussion of the means for realizing the welfare state. Liberals have not been clear about how the government should help the poor. They are not sure what to think of the groups that will pay for the welfare state, so they advocate policies that blur the distinction between contributors and recipients. Liberals are also unsure what to think of the poor; their policy advice ranges from optimistic self-help programs to patient and resigned income maintenance.

Running through this unfocused approach to policy-making is a tremendous reluctance to challenge or discomfit the American public. The welfare state cannot be both inexpensive and generous, stern and indulgent. But liberals have been reluctant to utter this truth, or the corollary that real welfare programs are apt to be difficult compromises that will evince limited measures of all these desired qualities. One can understand and even forgive, up to a point, the disingenuousness of politicians who fail to make these difficult truths plain. All the good that a politician would do presupposes his exercise of the power to do it; statesmanship may impose justifiable restraints on candor. But the

democratic pressures on intellectuals are less severe. Editors and writers do not stand for election, and as a result enjoy greater leeway to speak of disagreeable but unavoidable realities. Because liberal intellectuals have so consistently made the least of these possibilities, one must ascribe their failures not to individual shortcomings, but to liberalism itself. Liberal optimism makes it difficult to see unpleasant facts, and liberal democratism makes it difficult to say them.

CHAPTER FOUR

LIBERALISM ON THE AMERICAN SPECTRUM

I

The success of Arthur Schlesinger's 1949 book, The Vital Center, can be seen in the way in which its title entered the language as an indication of a certain type of liberalism. Vital center liberalism was liberalism purged of all sentimentality regarding the radical left, liberalism that steadfastly defended experimentation and discussion against socialist and capitalist dogma. Schlesinger's histories of the Roosevelt and Jackson administrations were arguments that non-ideological liberalism was the authentically American approach to politics.

In setting themselves apart from the American left, liberals like Schlesinger treated Communism as the chief issue. The motivating force behind the founding of Americans for Democratic Action was to rescue the reputation of liberalism from the Progressive Party of Henry Wallace, where the World War II cooperation between Russia and America was regarded as based on compatible or reconcilable principles rather than geo-political necessity. While Wallace and his followers blamed U.S. intransigence for the Cold War, vital

center liberals interpreted the East-West clashes as proof of incompatibility of liberalism and a sympathy for Communism. According to a New Republic editorial after the invasion of Hungary:

Ever since the Russian revolution, many sincere liberals from John Reed to Jean-Paul Sartre, though they might have admitted that Communism was often brutal and cynical, usually in the end came back to the same point: its stand against exploitation was nearer to the Sermon on the Mount than was Capitalism. Whenever presented with a choice between the two, many men of good will were inclined to give Communism the benefit of the doubt,.... Despite the horror of the labor camps, and the slaughter trials, the great myth of the 20th century remained intact....

It is this myth that the Russian tanks crushed as they lurched through Budapest.¹

Schlesinger denied that any American foreign policy, except for complete capitulation, would have avoided the Cold War. In the first place, the Kremlin regarded the very existence of a capitalist democracy as an intolerable threat. Secondly, "The personal word of the Communist is worthless and cooperation with him impossible. The phenomenon is worldwide." Finally, pragmatic Americans could never find a way to deal with an empire completely in the grip of ideology.²

Schlesinger disagrees with those on the left who acknowledge the evils of Stalin's reign, but say that these are accidentally not essentially related to Communism. Such people are disposed to believe anything good about Communism,

¹"Myth with Nine Lives," New Republic, 26 November 1956, p. 3.

²Schlesinger, Vital Center, pp. 99-100; 136; Schlesinger, Crisis of Confidence, pp. 135-136.

he says. Even the pact between Russian and Nazi Germany was forgiven. People who apologize for the Soviet Union do not realize that it is inherently totalitarian, given the unlimited sway accorded the Communist Party by Lenin. As a totalitarian state, the U.S.S.R. practices a form of tyranny more complete and horrible than even the most brutal dictatorships of the past.³

Because of its stern rejection of Communism, vital center liberalism was able to criticize American leftists sympathetic to Russia. Schlesinger's description of real liberalism makes this clear:

It is mistrustful of utopianism, perfectionism, and maximalism. It abhors the maudlin sloganism of the popular front of the '30's. It refuses to believe that lofty aspirations excuses cruel oppression. In particular, it lacks the patience for those who can pronounce societies "progressive" which develop huge and terrible systems of forced labor and deny freedom of expression and movement to the bulk of their populations.⁴

The failure of the American left to acknowledge the crimes of Communism is attacked again and again. This failure has placed the left in a state of "moral paralysis," it has aided the cause of reactionaries, and it has made the left seem indifferent to the reconciliation of liberty and democratic

³Schlesinger, Vital Center, pp. 149; 70; 53-54.

⁴Schlesinger, Politics of Hope, p. 70.

organization of the economy.⁵

Schlesinger was a forceful critic of Sen. Joseph McCarthy, but it is worth remembering that Schlesinger's anti-Communism was robust enough to take the possibility of internal subversion seriously.

There can be no serious question that an underground Communist apparatus attempted during the late thirties and during the war to penetrate the United States government, to influence the formation of policy and even to collect intelligence for the Soviet Union.⁶

Schlesinger even takes the discussion of anti-Communist excesses as an opportunity to remind liberals of the importance of sober anti-Communism. "When liberals denounce the Un-American Activities Committee for failing to distinguish between liberals and Communists, they should remember how long it took them before they started making that distinction themselves."⁷ Given the nature of the Soviet threat, Schlesinger concludes, "There is surely no alternative to paying exact and unfaltering attention to the Communists in our midst."⁸

⁵Schlesinger, Vital Center, p. 130-131; Lewis S. Feuer, "The Future of International Socialism," review of Socialism, by Paul M. Sweezy, in New Republic, 31 October 1949, pp. 17-18.

⁶Schlesinger, Vital Center, p. 128.

⁷Ibid., pp. 213-217.

⁸Ibid., p. 102.

This straight-forward liberal anti-Communism made it possible for liberals to endorse and defend the U.S. policy in Vietnam in the early sixties. Hubert Humphrey, for example, was capable of describing South Vietnam as if it were the newest TVA project. Arthur Schlesinger came to criticize the factual assumptions of the Johnson administration about Vietnam's importance to American interests, but he acknowledged that the motive that led Johnson into Vietnam-- a desire for America to defend democracy throughout the world-- was honorable.⁹

Schlesinger tried to find a vital center approach to Vietnam in his 1966 book, The Bitter Heritage. He advocated a "middle course" for getting out of Vietnam: de-escalation, diminished use of bombing, consideration of a cease-fire after progress had been made in negotiations. But as liberal revulsion over Vietnam grew, the possibility of a centrist position disappeared. Schlesinger himself grew steadily more critical of America's presence in Vietnam. Two years after arguing that the U.S. could not withdraw from Vietnam, Schlesinger said, "Our country has never undertaken anything more absurd in its history than the Vietnam war."¹⁰ His contribution became complete in 1978 when, in his biography of

⁹Schlesinger, Crisis of Confidence, pp. 156; 145-146; 152; 156-157.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 40.

Robert Kennedy, Schlesinger said that the New Left had been correct in calling for unilateral withdrawal in 1967. The certain fall of South Vietnam was less horrible than the continuing division of American society over the war.¹¹

As his doubts about Vietnam increased, Schlesinger tried to limit liberalism's responsibility for the war. In his history of the Kennedy presidency, A Thousand Days, Schlesinger tried to apologize for JFK's role in Vietnam. Though American troop strength in Vietnam increased from 685 to 16,732 during his presidency, Kennedy felt we were "over-committed" in South Vietnam, and planned to withdraw the troops he had sent there, not send more, according to Schlesinger. More broadly, liberals should not forget that while they became connected with Vietnam policy by mistake, a jingoistic foreign policy, contemptuous of world opinion, is the natural approach for American conservatives. In particular, the enormous influence of the American military often guarantees that our foreign policy will be bellicose, expensive, and foolish.¹²

¹¹Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy, 1941-1966 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), pp. 99-116; "Hitched to LBJ?" New Republic, 30 September 1967, p. 1; Schlesinger, Robert Kennedy, p. 772.

¹²Schlesinger, Robert Kennedy, pp. 708-722; Schlesinger, The Crisis of Confidence, pp. 164-165, 172, 265-266. See also, "1965: The Prime Task," Nation, 11 January 1965, p. 21.

Those to the left of the vital center saw the connection between Vietnam and liberalism very differently.

According to a 1966 editorial in Nation:

Essentially, the membership of ADA now says of Asia what non-ADA...liberals said about Europe in the late forties and fifties: that the danger of a Communist military take-over was vastly exaggerated, and that the cold war was in large part a make-work and make-profit enterprise.¹³

Vietnam was the vindication for that wing of liberalism that had been purged from the vital center by Schlesinger and the ADA, according to this argument. "The course of events since 1948 has largely confirmed what [Henry Wallace] had to say about the cold-war policies Truman substituted for the wartime policies of Roosevelt."¹⁴

What was the liberal view of Communism that was redeemed by the vital center's responsibility for Vietnam?

Under friendly peaceful competition, the Russian world and the American world will gradually become more alike. The Russians will be forced to grant more of the personal freedoms; and we shall become more and more absorbed with the problems of socio-economic justice.¹⁵

We would be well-advised, according to this argument, to take Soviet claims to having a non-discriminatory society devoted

¹³"Not So Ancient History," Nation, 9 May 1966, p. 538.

¹⁴"The Man Who Tried to Stop the Cold War," Nation, 6 December 1965, p. 431. See also, John S. Rosenberg, "The A.D.A.'s Long Shadow," Nation, 23 February 1980, pp. 208-209.

¹⁵"Wallace--A World Leader," New Republic, 23 September 1946, p. 339.

to equal opportunity seriously--seriously enough to see in the Soviet Union a challenge to the discrimination and inequality in our society that can only be remedied by more American equality. To be sure, the Soviet Union denied many political and personal liberties, but their people do not really miss them. "Perhaps Russians just have a different set of habits about civil liberties."¹⁶

According to "anti-anti-Communist" liberals, equating Communism with fascism or totalitarianism is unwarranted. Both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union have been dictatorships, but the Soviet dictatorship's concern was making Russia a better country for all its people, while the Nazis were a small clique bent on oppression. Unlike right-wing dictatorships, Communist Russia, and China, and Cuba "arose from intolerable social conditions and all tried to correct these conditions with a measure of social creativity." Similarly, the aggressiveness of Communist nations' foreign policy has been greatly exaggerated. Geographic and strategic interests have been far more important to Soviet foreign policy than ideology, and even Soviet ideology has been more receptive

¹⁶Stuart Chase, "Back to Grandfather," Nation, 19 May 1945, p. 566; Henry A. Wallace, "Jobs, Peace, Freedom," New Republic, 16 December 1946, p. 789.

to co-existence than Cold Warriors would have us believe.¹⁷

II

The issue of anti-Communism provided the clearest boundary between liberalism and the American left, but other questions more directly related to the welfare state also mattered. One critique made by Arthur Schlesinger of the progressives of the forties was that they had a dogmatic approach to policy-making, far removed from the pragmatism that was liberalism's key virtue.

History has discredited the hopes and predictions of doctrinaire progressivism about as thoroughly as it has those of conservatism. The progressive "analysis" is today a series of dry and broken platitudes, tossed out in ash-heaps (where they are collected and dusted off by the editors of the liberal weeklies).¹⁸

Only a doctrinaire leftist could fail to perceive that democratic capitalism offers political opportunities for the alleviation of economic ills, rendering a revolutionary transformation unnecessary, according to Schlesinger.¹⁹

Schlesinger's deeper criticism of the left is that it is hopelessly sentimental. "The defining characteristic

¹⁷Henry Wallace, "On Testifying in Washington," New Republic, 26 April 1948, p. 10; "The False Analogy," Nation, 26 April 1965, p. 436; I.F. Stone, "Toward World War III," Nation, 7 February 1948, p. 146.

¹⁸Schlesinger, Vital Center, p. 36.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 47-48, 153.

of the progressive,....is the sentimentality of his approach to politics and culture."²⁰ The progressive believes that "tolerance, free inquiry and technology, operating in the framework of human perfectibility, would in the end create a heaven on earth, a goal much more wholesome than a heaven in heaven."²¹ The horrors of modern history cannot disabuse the leftist of his faith in technology and progress. His naive optimism about human nature is impervious to the lessons of the twentieth-century. The leftist's sentimentality is most obvious with regard to his view of the Soviet Union, says Schlesinger. "However he looks at it...the USSR keeps coming through as a kind of enlarged Brook Farm Community, complete with folk dancing in native costumes, joyous work in the fields and progressive kindergartens."²²

Their sentimentality has rendered leftists politically irrelevant. Schlesinger contrasts the pragmatists, for whom liberalism is a "practical program to be put into effect" with the "Doughface progressives, who use liberalism as an outlet for private grievances and frustrations." "On the one hand are the politicians, the administrators, the doers; on the other, the sentimentalists, the utopians, the wailers."²³

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 36-37.

²¹ Ibid., p. 38.

²² Ibid., pp. 37, 40-41.

²³ Ibid., p. 154.

The leftist is politically irrelevant not only because his ideas are so tenuously connected to modern reality, but because he really views politics as a stage for moral posturing, not an arena for action. "Thus the expiatory role of resolutions in progressives' meetings. A telegram of protest to a foreign chancellery gives the satisfaction of a job well done and a night's rest well earned."²⁴

The liberal weeklies Schlesinger derided certainly included Nation and New Republic. In the years following World War II both magazines reflected popular front sentiments. Henry Wallace was actually the New Republic editor in 1947. Its pages reflected the effete purism that Schlesinger criticized. "No thinking liberal...can find more than two dozen members of the present Congress worthy of future support."²⁵ Nation, too, evinced an excessive concern for political symbolism. Its support for the 1946 Full Employment Act was delivered in these terms: "The important thing is the principle established, the expectation aroused, the pressure generated."²⁶ While the Nation has remained faithful to the left-wing position, the New Republic quickly

²⁴Ibid., pp. 41-42.

²⁵Henry Wallace. "The Sell-Out Eightieth Congress," New Republic, 4 August 1947, pp. 15-16.

²⁶I.F. Stone, "The Reservationists," Nation, 22 September 1945, p. 275.

joined the vital center of Schlesinger and the ADA. By the sixties, a New Republic article could criticize the New Left in these pragmatic terms:

The New Left is interested in, not power per se, but finding a defiant posture to hold in facing a power which probably can't be overthrown or which one does not really want to unseat....While Acton did say that all power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, it is not demonstrable that absolute impotence purifies absolutely,...²⁷

The New Left may have taken some positions similar to the progressives' of the forties, but centrist liberals criticized it in different terms. One contention was that the New Left was never really serious about politics. At least the Old Left thought its gestures mattered; the New Left seemed to accept, even celebrate, its own irrelevance. The New Left routinely acceded to its most radical and frivolous elements, for fear of seeming authoritarian, and thereby consigned itself to the periphery of American politics. The middle-class students who comprised the New Left were interested in playing at radicalism, rather than actually changing America for the better, and often focused on issues completely irrelevant to the poor.²⁸

²⁷Seabury, "Gideon's Army," p. 25. See also, James MacGregor Burns, "John F. Kennedy: Candidate on the Eve: Liberalism Without Tears," New Republic, 31 October 1960, p. 16.

²⁸Schlesinger, Crisis of Confidence, p. 218; James Ridgeway, "Freak-Out in Chicago: The National Conference of the New Politics," New Republic, 16 September 1967, p. 12; James Gilbert, "Lost Chance," review of The Movement, by

The New Left was as self-righteous as it was frivolous, liberals claimed. "What distinguishes the New Left is not only its unwillingness to define what its aims are after the revolution but its belief that such mystification is a virtue."²⁹ Such intolerance inevitably lead to the decomposition of the New Left, as even slight doctrinal differences occasioned the formation of splinter groups. Their intolerance, and youthful impatience, led the radicals to give up on America, and believe in the most sinister view of it and the most drastic steps to reform it. "The rationale of revolutionaries boils down to this: I know I am right; that knowledge overrides all else; I have been unable to get my views accepted; I will therefore try to get rid of the system that rejects them."³⁰

Arthur Schlesinger made the additional point that American conservatives were the principal beneficiaries of the New Left. His premise is that as American politics becomes more passionate it becomes less liberal. In 1968 he wrote:

If the New Left should finally succeed in making American politics a competition in hysteria and force, does any New Leftist really suppose that Tom Hayden and Elridge

Irwin Unger, in New Republic, 6 July 1971, pp. 29-30; Christopher Jencks, "Limits of the New Left," New Republic, 21 October 1967, p. 20.

²⁹ Schlesinger, Crisis of Confidence, p. 39.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 220; Jencks, "New Left," p. 20; "Dissent and Disorder," New Republic, 15 May 1971, p. 8; Irving Howe, "Historical Memory, Political Vision," New Republic, 9 November 1974, p. 26.

Cleaver will bring more armed men into the streets than George Wallace?³¹

Reactionaries needed the New Left, and the urban riots, to lend credence to their hysterical portrait of America; some of the more perceptive radicals acknowledged this fact and rejoined the world of the politically mature, Schlesinger claims.³²

But 1966 was unlike 1948. Liberals, divided by Vietnam and beginning to realize the complexity and intractability of the problems of race and poverty, lacked the intellectual authority to dispatch the New Left as they had the Old. The Nation, in fact, found some sympathetic things to say about the New Left in the sixties. The Young radicals, it claimed, had the same passionate concerns as earlier generations of leftists, but were free of the dogmatism that encumbered the Popular Front. "The New Left looks not only concerned but honest, open, free of icons, full of courage, and, above all, alive."³³

The consequence of these attacks on the vital center is that the left boundary of liberalism is very hazy. One of

³¹Schlesinger, Crisis of Confidence, p. 44.

³²Ibid., pp. 250-251, 272.

³³Howard Zinn, "The Old Left and the New: Emancipation From Dogma," Nation, 4 April 1966, p. 389. See also, "Henry S. Kariel, "The Persistence of Power," review of The End of Liberalism, by Theodore Lowi, in Nation, 15 September 1969, pp. 253-254.

the historical functions of liberalism has been to take measures, proposed by the American left for the purpose of replacing capitalism, and implement them in a way that merely modifies the existing political economy. Those liberals who reacted to the assaults of the sixties by insisting that there were certain ideas and measures liberalism could not embrace, and aspects of the American political order that must be defended unqualifiedly, were not called defenders of the vital center--they were called neo-conservatives. Liberalism is different from leftism, but is unwilling to make its differences too clear, lest future prospects for assimilating policy measures be limited. Therefore, liberals who flout these niceties towards the left are apostates.³⁴

III

The ambiguities and pitfalls of their relationship to the left have rendered liberals only too happy to try to define a clear division between themselves and conservatives. Arthur Schlesinger has frequently made the argument that the fundamental difference between the two is their attitude

³⁴Clecak, pp. 61-62, 88; Schlesinger, The Politics of Upheaval, p. 180; Jewel Bellush, "Old and New Left Reappraisals of the New Deal and Roosevelt's Presidency," Presidential Studies Quarterly 9 (Summer 1979): 263; Steinfelds, Neoconservatives, pp. 44-48.

towards change. Liberals welcome change and seek to make the best of it. Conservatives fear change, preferring the settled past to the unknown future. These opposing attitudes fit nicely into a cyclical pattern of American history. According to Schlesinger, American politics oscillates between periods of innovation, when liberalism is ascendant, and conservative eras where those gains are consolidated and assimilated. The sixties saw the release of the energy that was pent up during the fifties; the nation will eventually end its period of recuperation from the sixties and re-embrace liberalism.³⁵

Other liberal characterizations of conservatism are equally straightforward, but less respectful. Conservatism is described as irresponsible, incapable of distinguishing "legitimate social protest" from the "gratuitous mischief of agitators," and therefore inclined to "identify a particular status quo with the survival of civilization." Other liberals accuse conservatism of being exploitative, "playing on the frustrations and angers of embittered voters." And there is finally the assertion, made more or less plainly, that conservatives just aren't too bright. "This nation will be fortunate indeed on the day when it has a genuine conservative

³⁵Schlesinger, "Liberalsim," p. 12; Schlesinger, Politics of Hope, pp. x-xi, 67; Schlesinger, "Is Liberalism Dead?" pp. 73, 79.

movement which can match the ADA in intelligence and definition of the issues."³⁶

While liberals see how conservatives could be better, they do not think it likely that they will become part of a constructive dialogue on public affairs. Schlesinger's dismissal of the fifties' "New Conservatives" was brusque: "The civilized community has moved on to other things."³⁷ A decade later, New Republic referred to Barry Goldwater's followers as "the Absurd Right," while Nation called them "genocidal lunatics." The option of taking conservatism seriously was one that few liberals considered. "One has to realize," writes James Nuechterlein, "that many liberals genuinely cannot understand a political perspective that departs significantly from liberal assumptions."³⁸

There was a kind of conservatism that earned some respect from liberals in the fifties and sixties. It was personified by Sen. Robert Taft of Ohio. Some liberals said

³⁶Schlesinger, Vital Center, p. 174; "How to Be Conservative," Nation, 12 October 1963, p. 210; Elmer Davis, radio address, ADA papers, Series 4, number 41.

³⁷James Richlesy, "The New Conservatives' Last Gasp," review of Up From Liberalism, by William F. Buckley, Jr., New Republic, 19 October 1959, p. 57.

³⁸"Who's For Barry?" New Republic, 20 July 1963, p. 3; "The Dangers of 'Extremism,'" Nation, 27 July 1964, p. 21; George H. Nash, The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945 (New York: Basic Books, 1976), pp. 138-140; Nuechterlein, "Liberal World," p. 20.

that Taft was the voice of "genuine American conservatism;" their reason for saying this was their belief that conservatives like Taft, for all their protests about the costs of the welfare state, would eventually come around to acquiesce in its programs. To have these green eye-shade conservatives keeping the books was not a bad thing for liberalism, but this liberal characterization of conservatism makes it clear that the sort of adversary liberals prefer differs from liberalism only by degree; the real conservative is just a cautious liberal.³⁹

Perhaps the most fundamental liberal criticism of conservatives is that they are apologists for America's plutocracy. According to Schlesinger, conservatives must "renounce the theory that the only freedom worth worrying about is the freedom to make money, and that the only people worth listening to are those who have made a great deal of money."⁴⁰ More recently, the emergence of the neo-conservatives has been attributed to the desire of those intellectuals to defend and justify their affluence and prestige. Another article speaks of the new sophistication with which corporations have entered the market place of ideas, providing the

³⁹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "His Eyes Have Seen The Glory," Collier's, 22 February 1947, pp. 12-13, 34-40; "How to Be Conservative," Nation, p. 210; Schlesinger, Politics of Hope, p. 71; "Get Douglas, Get the Liberals," Nation, 9 June 1969, p. 716.

⁴⁰ Schlesinger, Crisis of Confidence, p. 275.

seed money for theoretical subtleties that mask "a crude, mean-spirited, demagogic attack on the welfare state, a kind of class struggle by some of the haves against many of the have-nots."⁴¹

Arthur Schlesinger has argued that the rich have been politically shortsighted in the U.S. Their loathing for Franklin Roosevelt was not only "indecent," given the trifling sacrifices his policies exacted, but it had a "fatuous intensity," scarcely comprehensible in later years. There seems to be, Schlesinger argues, an inverse relationship between business and political acuity. The classes comprised of those who became rich through boldness and keen insight are timid and obtuse when it comes to politics. The wealthy consistently fail to see how minor, painless concessions can protect the system from which they have profited, and obdurately resist even the most innocuous reforms.⁴²

Those American conservatives--"traditionalists" who rely heavily on the thought of Edmund Burke, are left in an untenable position by the shallow politics of America's upper classes. The absence of an aristocratic tradition has left those conservatives groping in vain for the "rich, humane, and somber sentiments of European conservatism." Schlesinger

⁴¹ Philip Green, "The I'm All Right Jacobites," Nation, 14 October 1978, p. 361; Howe, "Right Menace," p. 16.

⁴² Schlesinger, Coming of the New Deal, p. 496; A Thousand Days, p. 649; Vital Center, pp. 11-18; Crisis of the Old Order, p. 160.

argues that America's plutocracy lacks all the political and moral sensibilities that inform European conservatism, leaving only narrow materialism as a motivation. "Property seems to be the only symbol which American conservatives of the twentieth century can offer a spiritually hungry people--property raised to the dry religion of free enterprise."⁴³

The other sort of American conservative, the libertarian, who stresses the importance of unfettered markets and limited government, is criticized by liberals for being unrealistic about the nature of the American economy. In the first place, the modern American economy differs enormously from the free-market ideal praised by conservatives. Large corporations wield power--economic, political, and social--that effectively limits the impact of supply and demand. These corporations have their own bureaucracies, and, liberals have argued, they are as stultifying and impenetrable as the government bureaucracies decried by conservatives. Conservatives, in sum, have chosen to defend an uncomfortable fact by referring exclusively to an irrelevant idea.⁴⁴

⁴³Schlesinger, Politics of Hope, pp. 74-75; Francis Biddle, "The Blur of Mediocrity," review of The Conservative Mind, by Russell Kirk, in New Republic, 24 August 1953, pp. 18-19.

⁴⁴"Corporations and People," New Republic, 19 April 1980, pp. 5-6; "Adam Smith Updated," New Republic, 16 March 1959, p. 4; Michael Miles, "Reagan and the Respectable Right," New Republic, 20 April 1968, p. 26; Jerome Nathason, "John Dewey: American Radical," Nation, 22 October 1949, p. 393.

The politics of the American businessman are a further source of embarrassment to the conservative, liberals have argued. Capitalists have historically been the least reliable defenders of capitalism. The political power of American business is constantly being exerted to gain protection against foreign competition, subsidies and tax concessions, acquiescence in cartel arrangements, and cheap access to government-owned land and resources. That the entrepreneurs and their conservative apologists can expect the public to overlook this dense history of government activity while simultaneously believing that the nation is imperiled by pathetically small sums for the poor, is an incongruity liberals point to insistently.⁴⁵

So conservatives who praise the free market are unrealistic, according to this liberal argument. Other liberals have gone on to argue that even as a theoretical construct, more or less accurately represented in some facets of the working economy, the market is seriously deficient. There are, in the first place, important public needs that are ill-served by free enterprise. The private sector cannot do certain things well, because of a lack of capital, or an insufficient rate of profit, or the need to commit resources

⁴⁵Schlesinger, Vital Center, p. 30; "In Justice to Hayek," New Republic, 21 May 1945, p. 695, "Welfare Cheating," Nation, 13 September 1975, pp. 197-198; Fairlie, "Big Government," p. 25.

for a longer period of time than private investors will accept. The politically realistic will accept that needs such as slum clearance and housing for low-income families are going to be public sector projects.⁴⁶

Liberals believe that the market economy, even under the best circumstances, is inadequate in another way conservatives fail to realize. Defenders of free enterprise who praise its skill in maximizing satisfaction because everyone gets to "vote" with dollars fail to realize how the results of this election are distorted by economic inequality. Some appetites are satisfied fully and others are scarcely acknowledged in the market, regardless of their objective or social importance. If the government did not intercede to correct this situation the needs of minimally decent housing and jobs will be ignored. Public action alone can supply a reminder of values forsaken in the market.

The laissez-faire economy is to a large extent characterized by...the exploitation of the economic weak by the economic strong. Under the laissez-faire economy labor is treated as a commodity rather than as being made up of precious human beings entitled to all the dignities and human rights of free men and women.⁴⁷

⁴⁶"Transition to Peace," New Republic, 27 August 1945, p. 240; "II. Opposition--The Fair Deal Legacy," New Republic, 2 February 1953, pp. 5-6; Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, "Rent Strike: Disrupting the Slum System," New Republic, 2 December 1967, p. 12.

⁴⁷Statement by Senator Wayne Morse, 22 February 1948, ADA papers, Series 4, number 9. See also, "State of the Union," New Republic, pp. 9-11; "Keeping Them Poor," New Republic, 22 September 1973, p. 12.

In the liberal view, the market mechanism provides a vital public function in setting the price and directing the use of goods and services. But they depart from conservatives, who, as they see it, are guilty of uncritical loyalty to the market. The liberal position is that political wisdom consists of respecting the market's capabilities and its limitations. The government cannot surrender the determination of the national agenda to purely economic forces, and once it does establish priorities, it must be prepared to intervene in the economy when the private sector fails to supply certain needs. Given the tendency of the business community to grasp for ever greater political power, liberals favor a permanently antagonistic--or at least wary--relationship between government and business.⁴⁸

Liberals have argued further that the conservative critique of the welfare state is undercut by conservatives' blind faith in free enterprise. No matter how persuasive a particular critique from the right may be, the conservative alternative is invariably "leave it to the market," and this is often no solution at all. "However ineffectual government may be today, it seems impossible to deny that most of what it tries to do needs doing, that the problems it confronts

⁴⁸Schlesinger, "Is Liberalism Dead?" p. 71; Charles Abrams, "Homeless America," Nation, 4 January 1947, p. 16; Carl Keyser, "Big Business and the Liberals, Then and Now," New Republic, 22 November 1954, pp. 118-119; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "His Rendezvous with Destiny," New Republic, 15 April 1946, p. 554.

are real, serious, and increasing..."⁴⁹ There simply are no sane private sector solutions to problems that affect millions of people and require centrally organized solutions.

To attack current proposals to increase the coverage and benefits of our social security laws as "statism" does not tell us what to do about the unemployed, the aged, the widowed, the sick, and the physically disabled. What are the alternatives to a greatly expanded government social security program?⁵⁰

From the late forties until the mid-1960s liberalism was intellectually preeminent, and both those on the right and left had to define their positions with respect to the widely accepted premises of liberalism. Now the center is much weaker, and defines itself in terms of those on its left and right, often mechanically splitting the differences between them. What caused the vitality, and then the devitalization of the center? Events over which liberal intellectuals had no control, such as Vietnam and the civil rights movement, played a large role in the fortunes of liberalism. We have also seen how liberalism's intellectual shortcomings, its confusions about democracy, change, and egalitarianism, have

⁴⁹Melville J. Ulmer, "Friedman's Currency," New Republic, 6 November 1976, pp. 8-9.

⁵⁰"'Welfare State' Foes," ADA World, p. 7. See also, Scott Green, "Far From the Heavenly City," review of The Federal Bulldozer, by Martin Anderson, in Nation, 25 January 1965, pp. 87-88; "The Acceptable Compromise," New Republic, 14 March 1970, p. 11; Eugene Goodheart, "The De-radicalized Intellectuals," Nation, 8 February 1971, pp. 177-180; "One Nation," New Republic, p. 8.

hampered it--when liberal ideas came closer to being realized in the sixties, these flaws became more apparent.

With respect to the specific question of its place on the spectrum, liberalism was vital when it saw its differences from conservatives as differences of degree, and differences from the left as qualitative. During its best years liberalism shared the task of defending a free society with conservatives, a shared goal which made the liberal criticism of conservative economics more effective; it was the conservatives who were endangering free society by refusing to accept even modest reforms. It was possible in this era for liberals to speak abruptly to leftists, criticizing the sentimentality, the perfectionism, their blindness to the imposing truths of our century.

The shocks of the sixties, including the assault by the New Left against liberalism, rendered liberals incapable of stating vigorously what they were and were not about. Throughout the seventies, liberals' ideas were generated on the left--affirmative action and feminism being conspicuous examples. In the meantime, liberal attacks on the right grew more heated and less likely to acknowledge a common purpose or core of values. It is not surprising that liberals faced electoral difficulties in this period, for they seem to have willfully alined millions of voters who could not accept the leftist critique of American foreign

and domestic policy. And it is not surprising that liberalism is in intellectual disarray while in flight from its historic role of tempering, while upholding, the traditional institutions and patterns of a free society.

CHAPTER FIVE

ASSESSING POSTWAR LIBERALISM

Vital Center liberalism was preeminent during the fifties and early sixties because it was both pertinent to the major political issues and reassuring. It provided a framework for considering the Cold War, civil rights, and the welfare state that seemed to assure intellectuals considerable latitude within the boundaries of the public's sensibilities. The happy and frequent discoveries of the end of ideology reflected the widespread acceptance of liberalism. But the center has been all but completely devitalized since Vietnam and the Great Society. To re-establish itself as a public philosophy, liberalism will have to reconstitute itself on a foundation that brings the American understanding of justice, liberty, and individual responsibility to bear on the problems of political economics.

I

Liberals are entitled to be discouraged by their current predicament. The Great Society ought to have vindicated the liberals' efforts to secure an American welfare state. Instead, it marked the beginning of an era of

of astonishing hostility towards liberalism. "For twenty-five years the liberals had struggled...to carry out their ideas, but by the end of the Great Society, and for several years after, few men even dared to identify themselves as liberals."¹ The Vietnam War was a leading factor in the decline of liberalism. The American working class was appalled by the peace movement, its shrillness, and its flaunted counterculture. Liberals had enjoyed the support of workers and idealistic young people--the enmity among their constituencies split liberalism badly.² So too did liberals' reaction to a feeling of responsibility for an unpopular war. Vietnam gave liberals accustomed to battling entrenched interests the novel and distasteful chance to oppose the liberal establishment. "It is this confusion in liberal ranks that explains so much of the radicalizing of the Left and of the general state of intense passion and febrile disorientation in the liberal community of the 60's."³

Quite apart from its administrative difficulties, the Great Society as a legislative accomplishment posed

¹Martin, p. 191.

²Michael Walzer, Radical Principles: Reflections of an Unreconstructed Democrat (New York: Basic Books, 1980), pp. 172-173.

³Nuechterlein, "The People vs. The Interests," p. 70.

serious difficulties for liberals. The extent of liberalism's victory was undeniable. As William Leuchtenburg wrote:

For those who since the Great Depression had waited in vain for another era like that of the New Deal, the first half of the 1960's was a time for rejoicing, and the Eighty-ninth Congress recalled the halcyon days of 1935. "It is the Congress of accomplished hopes," declared Speaker John W. McCormack. "It is the Congress of realized dreams."⁴

But the realization of so many dreams at once depleted the liberal agenda. Fearful of being absorbed by history, liberals tried to develop new goals sooner than they might have wanted. And their close identification with the Great Society made liberals hostages to the success of its programs.⁵

The confluence of the civil rights and anti-poverty issues almost immediately complicated the Great Society, and left liberalism in a truly precarious position. The profound moral passion of the civil rights movement was brought to bear on the Great Society, insisting that it solve the complicated and urgent problems of the northern ghetto. Liberals were not so much averse to this demand as they were unprepared for it, and the attempt to save the ghetto and

⁴William E. Luechtenburg, "The Travail of Liberalism," in The Unfinished Century: America Since 1900, ed. William E. Luechtenburg (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 816.

⁵Martin, pp. 191-192; Wildavsky, "Government and the People," p. 26.

its inhabitants took on the frantic, desperate qualities of a battleground.

Community action programs, Model Cities, busing, affirmative action, job training, housing laws, rent supplements, food stamps, and all manner of services--the liberals tried many things. Had any one of them succeeded in reducing the poverty and segregation of blacks, there would have been no liberal failure and no liberal reappraisal. But none did; the slums continued, even grew worse.⁶

George McGovern's 1972 presidential campaign may be taken as the culmination of the efforts to vindicate liberalism by applying its precepts ever more assiduously to the problems of post war America. One can date the reluctance of prominent politicians to call themselves liberals from McGovern's utter defeat at the polls. Yet even before the votes were counted some liberals were criticizing McGovern's domestic policy proposals as politically reckless and economically dubious. These misgivings were the first signs of a desire to rethink liberalism, a need that would become more acute throughout the seventies.⁷

The Watergate scandals ought to have been a reprieve for liberals. Certainly it helped launch or prolong the careers of many liberal politicians. But those who call

⁶Martin, p. 258.

⁷Melville J. Ulmer, "McGovern's Economics," New Republic, 24 June 1972, pp. 21-23; "McGovern's New Economics," New Republic, 16 September 1972, pp. 8-9.

for greater government activity in the service of certain causes have not been helped by the public's deepened cynicism about government and its works. Watergate, following on Vietnam and the Great Society, contributed to an atmosphere of mistrust of the federal government. To contemplate the apotheosis of Sam Ervin from unyielding segregationist and states' rights defender to Watergate hero is to wonder whether Richard Nixon did not get the last laugh on his liberal tormentors.⁸

By the end of the seventies, by the time Proposition 13 and Ronald Reagan were winning huge electoral victories, liberalism seemed to be in utter disarray. Jimmy Carter's ambiguous politics, and liberals' uncertainty about how to position themselves in relation to him, did nothing for the clarification of liberalism. Keynesian economics seemed irrelevant to the "stagflation"--high unemployment and high inflation--of the seventies. The populist impulses lodged in liberalism made it difficult to oppose a tax revolt carried out through popular referenda. The legacy of the sixties remained to be defended; the problems of how to make only limited changes in the programs, and how to discover and publicize their successes seemed perpetual.⁹

⁸Martin, p. 258.

⁹"Guns and Margarine," New Republic, 4 February 1978, p. 6; Al Stern, "Liberal Programs Must Match Promise With Performance," Center Magazine, March/April 1981, p. 49; "In Defense of Good Intentions," New Republic, 13 December 1980, p. 5.

The pressures of these difficult circumstances brought about the most serious internal dissension and self-criticism among liberals since Henry Wallace and his followers were read out of the liberal movement. Some liberals looked at their philosophy and found it terribly stale.

The ADA platform of 1947 is pretty much national policy of 1966--welfare, education, housing, employemnt, civil rights. Improvements can be made, implementation is still spotty,...but the main points ADA...wanted to make have been made.¹⁰

Some liberals were willing to say out loud that enactment of the Great Society constituted a fair test of liberalism, that liberalism had been proven less than completely adequate by this test, and that liberals' who responded to these developments by calling for more of the same were not helping matters.¹¹

A related criticism of liberalism made by liberals was that its tenets were not only old, but were defended reflexively by those determined to avoid contact with any new, uncomfortable ideas. Melville Ulmer, writing in the New Republic in 1976, said that liberals' reactions to the issues of the seventies were "thoroughly predictable,...uniformly devoid of that creative thought that festering, unsolved

¹⁰Andrew Kopkind, "Humphrey's Old Pals: An Account of the ADA Convention," New Republic, 7 May 1966, p. 19.

¹¹See, for example, Eugene J. McCarthy, "What's To Be Decided?" New Republic, 27 July 1968, pp. 12-13.

problems ought to warrant."¹² Rather than comfortably retaining such questionable legacies as the anti-trust laws, the tax deductability of home mortgage interest, and Medicare and Medicaid, liberals should reevaluate how these policies contribute to a just society. To refuse to do so "would confirm the triumphant right-wing view of liberalism as a purely reactionary defender of the mid-20th-century status quo."¹³

Probably the most damaging internecine attacks concerned the relationship between liberals and blacks and the poor. The heightened sensitivity of some liberals to the needs and dignity of these groups led to harsh criticism of other liberals, those who continued in the traditional role of political brokers for the disadvantaged. The Citizens Crusade Against Poverty, established by Walter Reuther and the United Auto Workers, was dismissed as a "coalition of elitist groups" in which the participation of real poor people was mere "window dressing."¹⁴ Where the Wagner Act had conferred real political power on labor unions, the liberals' anti-poverty efforts amounted to plantation politics, based

¹²Melville J. Ulmer, "Jobs, Inflation, and Liberal Politics," New Republic, 20 March 1976, p. 6.

¹³"In Defense of Good Intentions," New Republic, 13 December 1980, p. 5.

¹⁴"The Poor Are Human," Nation, 2 May 1966, p. 508.

on the assumption that liberals knew the needs of the poor better than the poor did themselves.¹⁵ Liberals who had never before doubted their own good intentions were shocked by these accusations, and reacted by acceding to the demands of every aggrieved constituency. Before the seventies, liberals' clients--blacks, poor people, youth, women, Indians--had been willing to let established liberal leaders be their spokesmen. In the seventies these groups not only insisted on speaking for themselves, but on pressing issues "extraneous to liberalism" and unrelated to "the larger issues of poverty and the slums."¹⁶ Liberals reacted, most conspicuously in the McGovern campaign, by giving away the store. "The liberals of 1972 carried liberalism so far that they quit being liberals."¹⁷ Not only did they encourage all their client groups to speak for themselves, but they found it impossible to resist even the most extreme claims of these groups once they did speak. In embracing the "amnesty, acid, and abortion" agenda, liberals alienated their largest single constituency, the blue-collar worker. In embracing quotas,

¹⁵"By or For the Poor?" New Republic, 30 April 1966, pp. 5-6.

¹⁶Martin, pp. 208-209.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 217.

affirmative action, and busing, liberals raised troubling questions about the limits of their willingness to use government coercion in the service of social justice.¹⁸

Some of the harshest criticism of liberals came from those in the poorly demarcated area between liberalism and the New Left. They charge that liberalism has made so many compromises with the American power structure that it has become a better tool for preventing social justice than advancing it. In this view, the welfare state, such as it is, has two purposes. Its programs are supposed to be just sufficiently anesthetizing to forestall truly fundamental political change. And the measure of social control it provides is not meant to strengthen society's weakest members, but to extend and systematize the power of the strong.¹⁹

Even those who could be placed closer to the mainstream of American liberalism criticized the Great Society for placating the middle class and trying to reform rather

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 216-217.

¹⁹Richard Flacks, "Is the Great Society Just a Barbecue?" New Republic, 29 January 1966, p. 19; David Bensman and Luther Carpenter, "Dead End of an Ideology," Nation, 8 November 1975, pp. 459-460; Ronald Radosh, "New Lease for Liberalism," Nation, 26 August 1968, pp. 149-150. See also Gettleman and Mermelstein, p. 179; Elinor Graham, "The Politics of Poverty," in Gettleman and Mermelstein, pp. 216-217; Tom Hayden, "Welfare Liberalism and Social Change," in Gettelman and Mermelstein, p. 492, p. 86; Christopher Lasch, The Agony of the American Left (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), pp. 9-11.

than assist the poor. Lyndon Johnson's insistence on attaining consensus was the perfect example of liberalism at its most timid, these critics say. The Great Society was not only an opportunity to challenge the belief that people were poor as a result of their own shortcomings; the success of its programs absolutely required the repudiation of this bromide. Instead, the War on Poverty became "a war on the poor, aiming to change them beyond all recognition."²⁰

Liberalism lost its best opportunity for moral leadership, according to this argument, by accomodating middle-class notions about poverty resulting from individual failings, by the failure to argue that social disorganization caused poverty and social reorganization alone could solve it.²¹

II

The thinking and policies of postwar liberalism have not been left completely undefended. In the interests of making it possible to pursue such policy goals in the future, some liberals have felt the need to challenge the prevailing

²⁰Jencks, "Johnson vs. Poverty," p. 18.

²¹Ibid. See also Stephen Rousseas, "Consensus Liberalism: Johnson's Eisenhower Premise," Nation, 23 November 1964, pp. 375-379; Richard F. Hamilton, "Conviction or Compromise: The Trap of the Great Society," Nation, 22 November 1965, pp. 385; Stephen W. Rousseas, "The Great Society: An Old New Deal," Nation, 10 May 1965, p. 501; Paul Jacobs, "America's Schizophrenic View of the Poor," Nation, 20 September 1965, p. 197.

assessment of the Great Society. "The 'proof' of the Great Society's shortcomings, which probably has been accepted as given by a majority of the public and its policy makers, remains a primary obstacle to renewed social activism," write Levitan and Taggart.²² Thus liberals of this persuasion insist that the liberal approach to government has had significant, though little-noticed successes. The income transfer programs, despite their disarray and inequities, saved millions of Americans from destitution, and were particularly successful in feeding the hungry.²³ Even those programs with higher, and vaguer goals, such as the Job Corps, overcame problems with their clients, funding, and administration, making a profoundly beneficial difference in the lives of many trainees.²⁴

Those who defend Great Society liberalism insist that its success was greater than the sum of the successes of its individual programs. It's true that the most expansive goals of the Great Society were the ones that left it vulnerable to ridicule and charges of abject failure. But just getting the broader goals of social justice on the nation's

²²Levitan and Taggart, p. 5.

²³Nick Kotz, "The Politics of Welfare Reform," New Republic, 14 May 1977, p. 17; Nick Kotz, "Feeding the Hungry," New Republic, 25 November 1978, pp. 20-22.

²⁴Ralph W. Tyler, "The Federal Role in Education," in Ginzberg and Solow, pp. 172-173.

agenda constituted a real advance. According to Levitan and Taggart:

The specifics of the Great Society were not as crucial as its underlying thrust. The social welfare efforts begun in the 1960's were based on the belief that the future is not predetermined but can be molded by our energies and resources, that our nation is not condemned to passive acceptance of inequality of opportunity, poverty, hunger, urban blight, high unemployment and other ills.²⁵

What is important is that such ambitions clearly became the nation's business. That the programs were far from completely successful means only that the Great Society "turned out about as any sensible person should have expected."²⁶

Some liberals also feel that a fair evaluation of the welfare state is impossible owing to the prevalence of conservative criteria for such judgments. They argue that the widespread belief that the private sector is inherently free and the public sector inherently coercive is wrong. The poor who receive government assistance are not coerced but liberated by the additional income. Measures to reduce economic insecurity, such as unemployment compensation, do not coerce workers, but enable them to seek out better opportunities.²⁷ Harald Malmgren wrote:

²⁵Levitan and Taggart, p. 12.

²⁶Ginzberg and Solow, "Some Lessons of the 1960's," in Ginzberg and Solow, p. 220. See also Robert J. Lampman, "What Does it Do for the Poor?--A New Test for National Policy," in Ginzberg and Solow, pp. 67-68; Levitan and Taggart, p. 8.

²⁷"Adam Smith Updated," New Republic, 16 March 1959, pp. 3-4.

More gadgets for the affluent may make life nicer for the affluent, but surely more gadgets for them is less important socially than more hospitals, better transport, better schools. Remember, it is the poor who need these things, and the poor are least able to afford even that which is available.²⁸

There is a final liberal argument in defense of the modern welfare state, which holds that conservative critics of the welfare state have made unwarranted generalizations from the experience of the Great Society. Some liberals have argued that the Great Society was beset by too many unusual problems to support such generalizations. It was neither inevitable nor necessary that the welfare state should have taken on an agenda so ambitious as the Great Society's. Whatever the merits of community action and the attempt to attack many causes of poverty simultaneously, the Great Society incurred heavy political debts with such approaches.²⁹ Even worse was the way in which the grandiose rhetoric of the members of the Johnson administration, particularly Johnson himself, created expectations that the Great Society inevitably failed to meet. In launching the War on Poverty the Johnson administration "wantonly blur[red] the distinction

²⁸Harald Malmgren, "The Economy: A Case for Efficient Planning," New Republic, 7 November 1964, p. 43.

²⁹See Milton Viorst, review of The Politics of Neglect, by Bernard J. Frieden and Marshall Kaplan, in New Republic, 20 December 1975, pp. 25-26.

between campaign promises and legislative commitments...There was no prospect that any government could deliver on such ambitious promises, certainly not within the time limits that an impatient public would allow."³⁰

Even the most heroic policy making could not have redeemed the ungoverned rhetoric that launched the Great Society. But the half-hearted efforts ultimately put forth made matters far worse. The New Republic described the general pattern: "The President outlines the need in broad strokes, submits legislation that is far less brave and comprehensive than his rhetoric, then Congress whittles it down to size or throws it away."³¹ Vietnam and rising inflation emboldened Congressional conservatives, giving Johnson even less room to maneuver. An additional problem was the Johnson administration's habit of winning initial Congressional approval for a program by understating long-term costs; this eventually created a large number of "undernourished" programs.³²

The failure to adequately fund the Great Society was the most grievous missed opportunity of liberalism, but

³⁰Ginzberg and Solow, "Some Lessons," pp. 213-213. See also Steinfelds, p. 224.

³¹"What's Congress Doing?" New Republic, 7 May 1966, pp. 7-8.

³²Ibid.; Ginzberg and Solow, "Some Lessons," pp. 216-217.

liberals have argued that the American polity has always been niggardly towards its welfare state. Income transfer programs that give too little aid to too few people are derided as extravagant. Congress would authorize experimental programs, then not only fail to provide sufficient budgets, but called these programs to account long before the experiments could have possibly succeeded. Having ensured that the programs could only disappoint, Congressmen have then gone home to deride wasteful bureaucracies.³³

III

To fairly assess the argument that liberalism's approach to the welfare state has not been proved a failure, but has never really been tried, would require knowledge about what welfare state policies could have been implemented since 1945 and what, realistically, they might have accomplished. It is unlikely that the question of the time and money required for a fair test of liberalism can ever by anything but an extension of the debate over whether or how to have a welfare state.

Whatever merit there may be in the claims that the welfare state has been a victim of circumstances, liberals

³³Richard Haitch, "The Twenty-Fifth Child," Nation, 19 October 1963, pp. 238-241; Dudley Post, "Requiem for Model Cities," New Republic, 14 April 1973, p. 15.

cannot complain that history has failed to provide them with laboratory conditions for building a welfare state. Liberals cannot control events, but they can control their own utterances, the subject of this study. When liberals were more successful at explaining their ideas in ways acceptable to the American people, neither world war nor depression brought liberalism to a crisis comparable to its present one. To the extent that the clear expression of political ideas paves the way for a nation to make sacrifices or accept disappointments in the pursuit of certain goals, and it is the assumption of this study that this role is not inconsiderable, liberalism has suffered from an inability to persuasively articulate its purposes, or explain the consequences, pleasant and unpleasant, of their pursuit.

How has liberalism failed to justify its welfare state program? Liberals seek a commitment from the American people to the government to alleviate suffering and guarantee economic security. The fact that even President Reagan has been unwilling or unable to reduce or eliminate many programs suggests that most Americans are broadly sympathetic to these goals. But liberals tolerated a continuing lack of clarity about the nature of the commitment to the needy. Liberals have not settled the question of what sort of claim those who cannot live on the fruits of their own labor have on the public fisc. There seems to be no satisfactory middle ground

between treating public support as a right, a claim sure to be resented by many middle-class wage earners, or a privilege, an arrangement that the poor may regard as both tenuous and degrading. But the difficulty of the choice does not excuse the failure to make it. This is an area where ambiguity is likely to increase rather than restrain the conflicting claims of those who contribute to and those who receive from the welfare state. Even where liberals seemed to make a forceful stand on the issue, with the encouragement of the welfare rights movement, the rights they were appealing to were the positive rights already a part of existing welfare legislation. The question of whether these positive rights had a deeper justification was side-stepped.³⁴

Regarding the limits of the commitment they seek from the American people to aid the poor, the delineation of what a full and sufficient welfare state would be, liberals are similarly unclear. The liberal assertion that we should do more is often advanced; an answer to the question of how much more never is. Arguing for the Full Employment Bill in 1946, the Nation stated that "the important thing is the principle established, the expectation aroused, the pressure generated."³⁵ It is tactically questionable to assume that

³⁴Clecak, pp. 79-80; Nation, 23 May 1966, pp. 602, 620.

³⁵I.F. Stone, "The Reservationists," Nation, 22 September 1945, p. 275.

the partial liberal agenda will forge a mandate for the full agenda; as the experience of the sixties suggests, the partial agenda may discredit the full one. But it is even more reckless to fail to outline the full agenda, trusting that pressures and expectations created by the partial one will somehow cause that agenda to manifest itself. Indeed, it is not unfair to wonder whether there is such a thing as a full liberal agenda, a complete picture of how the welfare state should finally look. There are, for example, many good questions about the advisability of a guaranteed income plan, such as the negative income tax. But liberals seem not to fear that such a plan might fail, but that it might succeed, thereby creating political pressure to dismantle or reduce other parts of the welfare state. Such fears call into question the sincerity of the liberal concern for the poor.³⁶

The most serious failure of liberalism as a system of ideas is the refusal to disavow the Ponzi scheme aspects of the welfare state. Taxing the middle class to benefit the middle class can secure political support for the welfare state for a long time, perhaps indefinitely. But while the quantity of such political support may be very great, the quality is of a sort that undercuts the benevolent purposes of the welfare state. It is a system that encourages people

³⁶Margaret S. Gordon, "Failures of Unemployment Insurance," Nation, 7 June 1965, p. 611.

to ask what their country can do for them, and to become resentful of the welfare state as soon as they decide it is not enough.

John Frederick Martin has described the "politics of consumerism" as a political approach to the American people that regards all their claims and grievances as equally and fully legitimate. The politics of consumerism calls on the government, not to adjudicate among competing claims, or to defer some and deny others, but to strive ceaselessly to fulfill them all. Martin regards the politics of consumerism as liberalism's first, aberrant, response to the bewildering circumstances of the 1970s, a response that was exemplified by Jimmy Carter's first presidential campaign. But given liberalism's continuing inability to speak against anyone's claims on the nation's wealth, except those put forward by the malefactors of great wealth, it seems more reasonable to regard liberalism as essentially rather than accidentally related to the politics of consumerism.³⁷

In failing to make clear how and to what extent the welfare state would help the poor, while making it very clear that nearly everyone should in some manner benefit from the welfare state, liberalism has left the poor in an unnecessarily precarious political position. Founding the welfare

³⁷Martin, p. 262.

state on appeals to self-interest, rather than on honest acknowledgment of the need for sacrifices in the national interest, has made it easier to build the welfare state, but left it a less sturdy structure than it might have been. That liberals should resent the American middle class for acting unapologetically on the basis of self-interest, as in the passage of Proposition 13, is a tenuous position, given how little liberals have done to get Americans to think in any other terms.

It was the contracting economy of the seventies that fully revealed the disarray in liberal thinking. There was no Keynesian remedy for persistent and simultaneous inflation and unemployment. The abrupt end of the postwar economic expansion made the dalliance with qualitative liberalism seem effete. Most importantly, as the fiscal dividend vanished, it became clear that American liberalism had lost the capacity to provide useful advice about difficult political questions. The mistake of supposing postwar prosperity to be without end and without limits, though very great, was a pardonable misperception, given the extraordinary performance of the economy during the 1950s and 1960s. But liberals' readiness to believe that scarcity had been abolished was not unrelated to their reluctance to speak disagreeable truths about the need to transfer wealth from those who are self-sufficient to those who are not. If the stark experience of limits

concentrates the mind, as Samuel Johnson supposed imminent hanging did, then the cozy illusion that one has broken free from limits dissipates and corrodes thought.

Loathe to tell the great majority of Americans that they partake of a national obligation to the poor, the discharge of which will cause some discomfort, liberals have preferred to respond to a sputtering economy by railing against the rich and the large corporations. American liberalism is too sentimental and too fuzzy to have a great deal in common with Marxism, but it does partake of the fundamental Leftist suspicion of the rich and powerful in a capitalist society. The problem comes, as Nuechterlein has pointed out, when liberals seek to find a role for the American common man in this morality play. The actor is simply not suited to play the heroic proletarian. Liberals have, as a consequence, been placed in the awkward position of being more at home in harsh economic times, when the middle class might acutely sense an affinity for the poor and a resentment of the rich, than during prosperity, when the middle class reverts to its disappointing narrowness. Liberalism will be in need of rethinking until it is able to stop ascribing virtues to the typical American he does not have, or denying those that he does have.

Liberalism is in a state of crisis because it is unclear about the nature of its own message and about the

audience it seeks to reach. Whether the welfare state seeks only to alleviate the harshness of a private enterprise economy, or to supplant it with a socialized economy cannot be ascertained from the writings of the most prominent liberals. Americans who are neither rich nor poor cannot be certain whether they are being urged to disposses the one group group or assist the other. And Americans sympathetic to the charitable goals of liberalism are wary of how far the liberal agenda might extend. As Chesterton pointed out, a man who will walk right up to the edge of a cliff on a sunny day will stay miles away from it on a day thick with fog. Until liberals can be much less equivocal about the full implications of their program, they will continue to be denied the full support that their best impulses deserve.

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The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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