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Does Liberalism Have a Future?

Martin Peretz is worried that liberalism has no future in America. Editor-in-Chief of The New Republic, Peretz writes of his concern in a major article published in the 90th anniversary issue of his magazine. "Not Much Left," is a cry from the heart, offered by Peretz to what remains of a liberal movement in America. Peretz begins by arguing that, in the 1960s, it was conservatism that was devoid of ideas and facing a dismal political future. In the words of economist John Kenneth Galbraith, conservatism was "bookless" and intellectually bankrupt. Now, Peretz argues it is liberalism "that is now bookless and dying." Peretz has good reason for alarm. He—and the magazine for which he writes—represent a form of liberalism that is now largely without constituency in the Democratic Party and the political left. Peretz longs for the day when the progressivism of Theodore Roosevelt and the liberalism of Franklin Delano Roosevelt ruled the left and served as a fertile greenhouse for the incubation of potent political ideas.

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The liberalism of the Roosevelts bears little resemblance to the ideological radicalism of today's political left. Peretz's hero is the Protestant theologian Reinhold R. Niebuhr, whose frank recognition of the structural realities of human sinfulness shaped liberalism's view of both human nature and the political prospect. Now, Peretz laments that Niebuhr "is virtually unknown in the circles within which he once spoke and listened." Peretz wonders if Niebuhr's understanding of sin is the essential problem. "However gripping his illuminations, however much they may have been validated by history, liberals have no patience for such pessimism," Peretz explains.

As he sees it, this dismissal of Niebuhr and the classical liberal legacy would be bad enough. Nevertheless, no one has come along to fill the vacuum left by Niebuhr's absence. "Ask yourself: Who is a truly influential liberal mind in our culture? Whose ideas challenge and whose ideals inspire? Whose books and articles are read and passed around? There's no one, really. What's left is the laundry list: the catalog of programs (some dubious, some not) that Republicans aren't funding, and the blogs, with their daily panic dose about how the Bush administration is ruining the country."

The Democratic Party, once unified behind FDR and his liberal tradition, is now a collection of special interest groups. Liberalism finds itself in a defensive posture in the wider political culture, and the liberals fail because "they have not yet conducted an honest internal conversation that assumes from the start that the very nature of the country has changed since the great New Deal reckoning."

This is an important argument, and liberals and conservatives alike should take Peretz seriously. Here is a liberal in the classic tradition who wonders what has happened to the movement he has loved and served so long. Looking back over the 20th century, he recognizes that liberalism once ruled the day and that the movement made significant gains, largely through the leadership of political leaders like FDR and Lyndon Baines Johnson. The think tanks of liberalism were once the fountains from which the dominant political ideas flowed.

In those days, liberalism was defined as a movement that intended to protect the powerless from the powerful. In this context, the liberal instinct favored the individual worker and consumer who, they reasoned, was in danger of being

crushed by massive corporate enterprises. To many Americans, the New Deal made sense because government interventionism appeared to be the only root to recovery in the aftermath of the Great Depression and the Industrial Revolution.

As Peretz recognizes, the world has changed since FDR and LBJ. In one sense, liberalism fell victim to its own success. The concept of government interventionism won the day throughout most of the 20th century, leading to the development of the regulatory state and its twin, the welfare state. Liberals argued that government involvement in the economy—through regulation and control—would limit the oppressive growth of corporate structures at the expense of common Americans.

Nevertheless, the economic ideas of the New Deal make little sense in a world of multinational corporations and a decentralized economy. Entrepreneurship has been the leading edge of economic growth for the last thirty years or so, and big labor and big business have been virtually redefined in the age of the Internet, international competition, and the information age.

Peretz recognizes that liberalism has failed to keep up with these massive social transformations. Worse, liberals seem to have lost sight of their central ideals. “Liberals like to blame their political consultants,” Peretz asserts. “But then, if you depend on consultants for your motivating ideas, you are nowhere. So let’s admit it: the Liberals are themselves uninspired by a vision of a good society—a problem we didn’t have 30 years ago. For several years, the liberal agenda has looked and sounded like little more than a bookkeeping exercise. We want to spend more, they less. In the end, the numbers do not clarify; they confuse. Almost no one can explain any principle behind the cost differences. But these are grand matters that need to be addressed, and the grandest one is what we owe each other as Americans.”

Race has been one of the central issues of liberal thought for the last half-century. Yet even on this issue, Peretz sees the left beholden to outmoded ideas and unwilling to face new realities. “One of the legacies of the ’60s is liberal idealism about race,” Peretz argues. “But that discussion has grown particularly outmoded in the Democratic Party. African Americans and Caribbean Americans (the differences between them another largely unspoken reality) have made tremendous strides in their education, in social mobility, in employment, in housing, and in politics as images and realities in the media.” So far, so good. Nevertheless, Peretz complains that the Democratic Party is now politically committed to “the usual hustlers.” As he explains, “Jesse Jackson is still paid off, mostly not to make trouble. The biggest insult to our black fellow citizens was the deference paid to Al Sharpton during the campaign. Early in the race, it was clear that he—like Carol Moseley Braun and Dennis Kucinich—was not a serious candidate. Yet he was treated as if he just might take the oath of office at the Capitol on January 20. In the end, he won only a handful of delegates. But he was there, speaking in near-prime time to the Democratic convention.” Peretz labels Al Sharpton as “an insider of racial conflict” and charges the Democratic Party with a combination of pandering and cowardice in giving Jackson and Sharpton roles as party statesmen.

“This patronizing attitude is proof positive that, as deep as the social and economic gains have been among African Americans, many liberals prefer to maintain their own time-honored patronizing position vis-a-vis ‘the other,’ the needy.” In an amazing passage, Peretz acknowledges that this Republican administration has done better than its Democratic predecessors on matters of race.

“This is, frankly, in sharp contrast to President Bush, who seems not to be impeded by race difference ‘and gender difference’ in his appointments and among his friends. Maybe it is just a generational thing, and, if it is that, it is also a good thing. But he may be the first president who apparently does not see individual people in racial categories or sex categories. White or black, woman or man, just as long as you’re a conservative. That is also an expression of liberation from bias.” That is an amazing claim, and a courageous argument to present in *The New Republic*. Beyond this, Peretz even argues that conservatives “have their ideas, and many of them are good.” As examples, Peretz lists charter schools and vouchers. “But give me a single liberal idea with some currency, even a structural notion, for transforming the elucidation of knowledge and thinking to the young. You can’t.”

The use of American power is another issue of Peretz’s concern. He accuses his fellow liberals of continuing a strange and inexcusable love affair with Fidel Castro and of refusing to acknowledge the evil of world Communism. Liberals, Peretz explains, argue that Communism “had an ideal of the good.” He dismisses this argument with a sneer, noting that Communist revolutions and regimes murdered many more millions of innocents than the Nazis “and transformed the yearning of many idealists for equality into the brutal assertion of evil, a boot stamping on the human face forever.”

Peretz ends his article by eulogizing liberalism as a movement that once offered ideas of transformational power that now is “peddling one disaster scenario after another.” In the end, Peretz offers hope that liberalism can be “liberated from many of its own illusions and delusions.” Time will tell.

What Peretz largely misses is the transformation of the political left from classical liberalism into radical ideologies of liberation—often packaged in ways that camouflage the truly radical nature of their ideas. The Democratic Party is no longer the party of FDR and LBJ. As a matter of fact, the Democratic Party ceased to be the party of LBJ even while Johnson was in office. By the end of the 1960s, the political left had fractured into a constellation of special interest groups committed to identity politics.

Furthermore, the worldview of classical liberalism—precisely that worldview understood and defended by intellectuals like Reinhold Niebuhr—understood the necessity of respect for social institutions like marriage and family. The hostility of the political left to such “bourgeois” notions owes more to the radical left of European and American intellectual life than to the reasoned political discourse of the classical liberals.

The 90th anniversary of *The New Republic* prompted Peretz—joined by a host of other writers—to consider the future of liberalism itself. The magazine takes pride in the fact that it, as a major journal of political opinion, helped popularize the term “liberal” in the 1940s. Like most periodicals, *The New Republic* has been through various transformations over its nine decades. In one sense, this special anniversary issue of the magazine indicates that it is coming home to its roots.

Writing in *U.S. News & World Report*, columnist John Leo suggests that Galbraith’s wrong-headed prediction of conservative collapse in the 1960s could serve as good news for American liberals. After all, if conservatives rebounded into intellectual vitality and political influence in the Reagan revolution, perhaps a new liberal standard bearer will appear on the horizon. That would be an interesting prospect, but conservatives should welcome a genuine debate with classical liberals over issues ranging across the political divide and the spectrum of ideological conflict. One of the greatest signs of sickness in our current political culture is that conservatives have virtually no one with whom to engage in a lively and substantial political conversation. The left has simply splintered into so many forms of ideological radicalism, that political discourse has become all but impossible.

Martin Peretz deserves credit for publishing a lively magazine and for publishing his own courageous article. Conservatives should take Peretz’s analysis seriously. It remains to be seen whether liberals will do the same.

