

those whom it happily welcomes from the Third World. But these gestures should not be equated with recrudescing Stalinism or authentic European socialism. The Left assumed a new identity when its working-class base began to dwindle and when it traded that base for yuppies and self-assertive Third World constituencies. The Left then proceeded to move in a culturally radical direction, a development whose consequences we are now seeing. ■

PAUL GOTTFRIED is professor of the humanities at Elizabethtown College and author, most recently, of *The Strange Death of Marxism*.

Jeffrey Hart The terms “liberal” and “conservative” remain in current usage and probably retain value, but the question is a tricky one. We will begin with definitions, but things get difficult when we try to apply the terms to actual politicians and their policies.

Let’s start with Hobbes and Locke and their assumptions about human nature. For Hobbes, man’s heart was savage. In the mythic pre-social “state of nature,” life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” That required the restraints of strong government. For Locke, in contrast, “the state of nature has a law of nature to govern it ... and reason ... is that law.” Thus the restraints of government could be mild. Perhaps Hobbes was conservative, Locke liberal.

Burke, rather than starting with assumptions about human nature, began with experience and shared history. In practice, he was a reformist Whig. For example, advocating prudence, he urged conciliation with the American colonies, offering everything except formal independence. Adam Smith said that Burke was the only man in England who understood his economic theory; but Burke also urged the importance of the “unbought grace of life.” He would not approve of everything-has-a-price capitalism.

Burke is thought to be a conservative. He did attack the French Revolution. But if we strip away such operative passages as the one on Marie Antoinette, Burke should be understood as a critic of ideology, “abstract ideas,” “metaphysic dogma.” To the Rights of Man urged by the *philosophes*, he opposed the actual historic liberties of Englishmen.

Let us try to cut to the core of Burke’s thought. I first tried this in a Columbia graduate seminar taught by Jacques Barzun and Lionel Trilling. I offered this: “Most of the things we do are done by habit. If you tried to tie your shoes every morning by reason, you would never get out of the house. Try playing a violin by reason.” Barzun accepted this and raised me. “Burke,” he said, “wants his morning newspaper delivered on time.” In other words, social institutions are the habits of society. They make society work.

But suppose serious change becomes necessary. For Burke, you don’t judge change necessary by appealing to abstractions, to pamphleteers and journalists. You appeal to the man of experience, the statesman. In the *Reflections*, the statesman is Lord Somers, who knew the institutions of England and knew in 1688 that James II had to go. That kind of knowledge cannot be taught but only absorbed from experience.

Everyone knows that Burke opposed the abstract doctrines he saw as energizing the French Revolution. Less often realized is that he soon came to see the Revolution as inevitable, without, of course, withdrawing any of his hatred of ideology. In 1791, he wrote:

If a great change is to be made in human affairs, the minds of men will be fitted to it; the general opinions and feelings will draw that way. Every fear, every hope will forward it; and then they, who persist in opposing this mighty current in human affairs, will appear rather to resist the decrees of Providence itself, than the mere designs of men. They will not be resolute and firm, but perverse and obstinate.

In the *Reflections*, more than a year earlier, Burke had not been Burkean enough. The complexities of society can include, as well as complex institutional structure, complex social forces that become irresistible: the French monarchy had been doomed by the accumulation of such forces.

Burke was a conservative in the sense of William Buckley’s definition of conservatism as the “politics of reality.” Unfortunately, many supposed conservatives—I will echo T.S. Eliot’s phrase—“cannot bear very much reality.”

Let us try a few notes on presidents and their success or failure in dealing with reality. Through many needed economic reforms, such as the SEC, it can be argued—Conrad Black and other historians have done so—that Franklin Roosevelt saved capitalism. In that sense, in dealing with realities and not ideology, he was conservative. He was also bipartisan in his war leadership and unanimously considered a great war leader.

Harry Truman, a liberal Democrat—the Henry Wallace Left did not think him liberal enough, the Strom Thurmond segregationists thought him too liberal—was also a realist. Against the segregationists, Truman knew the civil-rights revolution was gestating. Against the Wallace Left, he knew the Soviets had to be blocked.

Eisenhower adopted a fatherly persona. But in fact, he was realistic, lucid, even ruthless. He knew the old empires were finished, refused to help the British and French at Suez, refused to help the French in Vietnam. He knew the New Deal could not be repealed, and of Sen. William Knowland, the right-wing hero, he asked, “How stupid can one get?” A

complete realist, Eisenhower won re-election in a landslide and, with Franklin Roosevelt and Reagan, another prudent realist, is among the top ten presidents.

That brings us to George W. Bush, the most ideological president in American history. He thinks in abstractions and acts on them. No president stands at a greater remove from Burke's critique of ideology. His foreign policy—the march of democracy—is immune to fact and, notably in Iraq, to a Burkean sense of history. In economics (supply-side dogma, calamitous debt), in science (Intelligent Design), in his opposition to stem-cell research and therapy, Bush has been a brass-bound ideologue. On stem-cell research, Bush formulates his opposition this way: "It's wrong to destroy life in order to save life." His first use of the word "life" refers to a few insensate cells, his second to an actual sick human being. His formulation is self-refuting. As an exercise in the use of the "moral imagination"—a term coined by Burke—let us cut through verbiage to concrete fact: if you had a child with Type I diabetes, a devastating disease, and I said I had a few cells that would cure her, would you turn this offer down? The question answers itself. It also answers Bush.

The common denominator of successful presidents, liberal or conservative, has been that they were realists. Because Bush is an ideologue remote from fact, he has failed comprehensively and surely is the worst president in American history—indeed, in the damage he has caused to the nation, without a rival in the race for the bottom. Because Bush is generally called a conservative, he will have poisoned the term for decades to come. ■

JEFFREY HART is a senior editor of *National Review* and author, most recently, of *The Making of the American Conservative Mind*.

Nicholas von Hoffman The words "liberal" and "conservative" may be meaningless to anyone given to precise definition, but they remain useful for fisticuffs, serving as verbal mud pies in political disputes.

True, calling someone a conservative is not the same bone-crusher as calling someone a liberal. The latter epithet is so damaging that people who have been scored off as fuzzy, liberal caterpillars have been known to hump off under a leaf in hopes of re-emerging as brilliantly attractive, progressive butterflies.

But even though the progressive label may afford a degree of cover, there is something wishy-washy about the word. A progressive is a blanched liberal, and those who adopt the name rarely fool anyone. Of late the ruse has been so uncon-

vincing that professional politicians are reconciling themselves to donning the hair shirt of liberalism again.

There is no conservative counterpart to the liberal who blushes and fidgets when the name is applied to him. Conservatives take pride in the appellation as they fight abortion, flag burning, and the love that once dared not say its name but now shouts it from the rooftops. Only lately have they begun to encounter occasions when it's an embarrassment. The longer George W. Bush and his confederates remain in office the more frequently such instances occur.

Past that, the liberal-conservative polarity has disappeared. The guiding principles that distinguished the two once great schools of thought are not doing much guiding. When a faction inside the American Civil Liberties Union is evidently trying to gag an opposing faction from publicly expressing dissent, we are wading around in a swamp.

Bipolar politics is our tradition, but the old poles have lost their magnetism and, for the moment, reconstituting them seems impossible. What would a new conservatism or new liberalism look like? What principles would it steer by? And if not two parties, how about three or four or ten? A non-starter. Our laws and political institutions are so stoutly designed for bipolar politics that multi-polarity does not have a chance. Even if it did, in a country that is having trouble scraping together two political parties founded on something other than nonsense, a multi-party system looks less than promising. There are days when it seems we don't have enough decent political ideas to stock even one.

In lieu of political parties based on stately essays by the great thinkers of the past, we can continue with what we have—which is crisis politics. Whoever comes up with the most frightening crisis wins. Of late it has been the Republicans, whether conservative or not, who have delivered the knockout punches. Dead babies, dirty bombs, men exchanging wedding bands with other men, toppling skyscrapers, evil Arabs, girl bishops—they've swept the Democrats, whether liberal or not, out of contention. Not that the D's don't have hopes. It has been said that the Democrats are but one Katrina away from seizing power.

None of the above has much to do with any conservative-liberal continuum. It has to do with how one political gang can jump on what's happening at the moment and cash in on it. But then polarities of principle, the grand abstractions that are so hard to apply, have seldom dominated our government policy. If it were otherwise, the Concord Coalition would not be a flyspeck of a group, unknown outside the small world of policy wonkery.

So what does the future hold? Many symposia, that much is certain. What else? Many ad hoc alliances between different parts of the busted-up ideological centers of the now defunct Right-Left cores. A recent example of such was the coalition of libertarians, conservatives, and lefties renting