

The Iraq War only drove a bigger wedge into my old affiliations. I was distressed to see the Democratic Party lie down for the war, for a number of reasons. Partly because of the interventionist attitudes that came out of the Balkans experience. And partly out of pro-Israel considerations.

And of course, a lot of them have stuck with the war, right on down the line, alongside the Republicans.

The realignment I would like to see has everything to do with the war. The war has alienated me from our leaders and created a tremendous crisis for our country. It has caused us to despise world opinion, damaged our economy, and done hellish things to Iraq and the Middle East. The responsibility for that war lies on both wings: the nationalistic and neocon Right is chiefly responsible, but the neo-interventionist Left has played its part.

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The values that have separated me from the War Party are ones I associate with my '70s and '80s Democratic political education in populism and multiculturalism. My populist values tell me that when an elite segment of a society plans a utopian war without having to put their own kids in harm’s way, there’s a moral hazard. This war was planned without any degree of public consensus. We still don’t know all the reasons for it: it’s just the good old-fashioned smoke-filled room.

As for multiculturalism, I learned in my 30s to try to respect the other and try to understand him and demonstrate tolerance for different ways of life. The demonization of Arabs and their societies and the justification of collective punishment for suicide bombers—I find these attitudes appalling. I know a lot of these attitudes flow out of Israel’s experience with Arabs, but I don’t see that this should be our experience, too. The distance between me and many of my former Democratic liberal contingent is demonstrated by a Thomas Friedman comment on *Slate* that the suicide bombers in Tel Aviv pizza parlors had convinced him it was necessary to burst the terrorist mindset by stomping Baghdad. I have never seen such an intimate connection between American interests and Israel’s. “I feel the [American] left is also claimed by the Israel lobby,” Mary-Kay Wilmers, editor of the *London Review of Books*, said to me earlier this year, after she had published the landmark paper on the Israel lobby by Mearsheimer and Walt.

I marched against this war. I’m grateful for the company I’ve now gotten from American conservatives, and I see my own views as coming out of an estimable American tradition: tolerance, *laissez-faire*, don’t-tread-on-me values. There seems to be a lot of cross-pollination at work. Strands of isolationism and realism and fiscal conservatism have influenced me, while I sense that the Left has been able to persuade the Right on the importance of global warming and even affirmative action.

Those conservatives have other ideological baggage I don’t particularly care for. I think of myself as pro-Hispanic on immigration issues, and I’m pro-abortion. I can well imagine having clashes with my new friends over these issues some day. Not now. The country’s in crisis. Inasmuch as we can make any headway together, I don’t think we would allow these issues to jam the spokes. And by the way, when it comes to abortion, I’m distressed that so many Democrats seem to have whittled all their most urgent concerns down to that one issue. I don’t think it’s that important.

I’d say again, the country is in crisis, and my best hope is to see a coalition of engaged and idealistic people, people who believe in the specialness of the American example and who want to bring back the tradition of tolerance.

As a political actor, a coalition like that would be a kind of radical center. As an old left-winger, and an optimist, I would like to see these attitudes come alive in a popular and idealistic groundswell *a la* the late '60s. Maybe they will gather around Democratic congressmen newly elected later this year. Maybe Republican populists, men like Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, will demonstrate their independence and openness to these ideas. It is scary and exciting to think that popular opinion could turn on the elites and complacent politicians that got us into this war. To do so without demagoguing, and without anti-Semitism, will be a tough act, but an essential one. ■

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Chilton Williamson Jr. Conservatism reflects the belief that man should live—individually and collectively—according to his nature, which is God-given and immutable. Liberalism insists either that there is no such thing as human nature or that it was improperly understood—and therefore incompletely or perversely expressed—before the 17th century. (Sometimes liberals appear to be arguing both of these contradictory propositions at once.) Clearly, no significant contemporary political philosophy, program, or party can be called conservative in the sense described above. (The

exceptions are the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, but they are infinitely more than the sum of these things.) Just as clearly, every contemporary philosophy, program, or party is, according to my twin definitions, liberal, including the “conservative” ones. Hence it seems that conservative and conservatism are no longer relevant terms (though as relative ones they retain a certain usefulness), while liberal and liberalism remain as accurate as they ever were.

It is untrue that America lacks a truly conservative tradition, attenuated as it may have been. (It is now almost extinct.) Nevertheless, the history of the United States is conclusive evidence that republican government is at odds with conservatism and finally destructive of it. (I take this to be the point of Gordon S. Wood’s *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* and of his just-published book, *Revolutionary Characters*.) There can be no conservatism outside of a hierarchical society, just as civilization is ultimately insupportable absent the structure, guidance, and authority that an aristocratical system, itself controlled by the institution of monarchy, provides. A half-century ago, Willmoore Kendall included monarchism as one of those political alternatives forever mooted by the Founding Fathers and the U.S. Constitution, and he may well have been right about that. (Who, really, can say? The future is always full of surprises, a few of them nice ones.) But that is hardly the point. The issue is not whether America could ever be returned to the social and political institutions of the mother country but whether conservatism as such exists, or can exist, in the United States today. I say it does not and cannot.

Because in the contemporary Western world liberal and conservative denote points on a graduated spectrum rather than distinct and separate opposites, the polarities of Left and Right—dating, as everyone knows, from revolutionary France—are far more accurate terms for the designation of political distinctions. Since Left and liberal are always and everywhere synonymous, improvement lies in the replacement of conservative by rightist, a clear-cut, hard-edged, hard-sounding, and uncompromising word that refuses to mince meanings and brings to mind such unpleasant-seeming writers as Joseph de Maistre (described by a 19th-century French historian as “a fierce absolutist, a furious theorist, an intransigent legitimist, apostle of a monstrous trinity composed of Pope, King, and Hangman, always and everywhere the champion of the hardest, narrowest and most inflexible dogmatism, a dark figure out of the Middle Ages, part inquisitor, part executioner”). The drawback is that America, with its Protestant and republican history, unlike Europe, lacks a rightist tradition that is the true equivalent of the conservative one. Thus, while the adjective’s meaning is crystalline, in the United States it lacks a proximate object to specify and is therefore as good as irrelevant.

The assumption behind the present exchange of opinions is that the word “liberal” has become as nebulous, confusing, and misleading as “conservative” now is, yet this seems to me a misapprehension. To the extent that “conservatism” is meaningless, that is because the word has been dishonestly used by modern conservatives with the conscious intent to deceive. Not so with liberalism, since liberals never attempt to pass themselves or their ideologically pure ideas off as conservative (except when they are running for something and want the conservative vote under false pretenses), since to do so would be to abdicate their intellectual and moral status as infinitely compassionate demigods and philosopher-kings. Still, many observers claim to have noted a degree of convergence between liberal and conservative in recent decades—precisely the reason why the validity and utility of liberal vs. conservative are currently subject to scrutiny and reconsideration.

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In fact, there is a simple test available for both the liberal components of a given political or social program and its fundamental purpose or intent that yields far clearer and less muddied results when applied to liberal schemes, plans, and proposals than to conservative ones. This is the ontological consideration. An example is environmentalism, a movement that in the United States was initiated by conservative Republicans and today is dominated by liberal Democrats, with the aid and support of its original conservative cohorts. What, after all, could be more conservative than conservationism, or even preservationism? Thus environmentalism appears to be a bipartisan business, supported by liberals and conservatives alike: an example of that confusing convergence that is supposed to make liberalism and conservatism indistinguishable, or nearly so.

But when we compare the ontological bases for liberal and conservative support of environmentalist activities, we discover that liberals proceed from neopaganist assumptions, conservatives from classical and Christian traditionalist ones. The philosophical difference between them is not far to seek: it is evident in nearly everything environmentalists of one kind or the other say or do. Not only do they differ in philosophy, moreover, they do so in motive as well. And the same goes for other issues on which liberal-conservative convergence, or what Martin

Luther King scholars call voice-merging, allegedly occurs: foreign interventionism (in the Middle East and in Africa, for instance), the application of free-market economics to Great Society programs, and so forth. It is what neoconservatism is all about.

Liberalism marches forward on a course straight as a plumb line. It is conservatism that, advancing without compass and without courage, veers, staggers, and drifts to intercept the liberal column, with which it all so easily falls in step. ■

CHILTON WILLIAMSON JR. *is editor for books at Chronicles and author of The Conservative Bookshelf.*

Clyde N. Wilson The terms “liberal” and “conservative” were usable signs in a society in which the state was governed by politics. They are of little use in the 21st-century United States because “politics” no longer plays any significant role in governance.

In a dynamic and free republican society, citizens of similar ideas, values, and interests, and even inherited allegiances and inclinations, come together to seek representation, forming political parties as their vehicle in the contest with citizens of opposing tendencies. (In addition, in the United States, political representation has been geographically based rather than strictly a matter of parties.) Citizenship—participation in politics—assumes mental and material independence and a social identity pre-existing the state apparatus. None of these preconditions for politics any longer characterize the American regime.

Today congressmen do not represent their constituents but represent the state in its distribution of favors to their constituencies, and their tenure rests upon their success at this function. The relationship of president and Congress now resembles that of a Roman emperor and senate. And as in that historical case, a large part of the population is proletarianized, lacking the qualities for citizenship as it has been understood.

The American regime has reached a state of imperial bureaucratization in which institutions—not only parties, but armed forces, police, churches, media, charities, schools—exist to serve those who control and benefit from them rather than to carry out the social functions for which they were established. In the last two presidential elections not a single substantive issue was raised or contested. The nominating conventions did not debate and decide the positions they were to represent but merely ratified the dictates of the leader. Rather than the party representing the people, the people were sent forth to represent the party. The Republican conventions that nominated George W. Bush did

not even allow a dissenting voice to be heard nor allow any statement that might distinguish their party from the opposition on any substantive matter. There was no politics at all—only marketing.

After the elections, it was seen that the parties, except at the fringes, do not disagree on anything of importance nor do they represent the people on any important issue—for instance, war, foreign aid, immigration, or quotas.

On behalf of the imperial bureaucratic regime, the Democrats absorb and defang whatever liberal inclinations remain in their constituency, and the Republicans do likewise for the conservatives. The only difference is that the Democrats institutionally are wired to keep up the momentum of an already liberal state, while the Republicans’ conservatism has always been a pure fraud.

If, as may be the case, a real politics is struggling to be born, one that involves representation of the interests and values of the remnant genuine elements of American society that have a reality apart from the state, then the terms “liberal” and “conservative” will not much apply. Politics against the imperial regime will have to be both defensive and radical, that is to say, it will have to be reactionary. ■

CLYDE N. WILSON *is professor of history at the University of South Carolina and editor of The Papers of John C. Calhoun.*

John Zmirak In one sense, the Left/Right dichotomy is like those chemicals that are so simple that they’re toxic. Why, when discussing the panoramic landscape of theories about how man shall live in community, should we choose a one-dimensional model—which offers no up or down, much less a diagonal? Can you imagine imposing such a primitive scheme on any other field of human life? Picture a Left-to-Right spectrum of painters, poets, or national cuisines. You could draw one up according to arbitrarily chosen qualities—such as realism, rhyme scheme, or wasabi content. It can be done, but why bother?

Our style of talking about politics began with the seating of deputies in the National Assembly during the French Revolution: on the left sat the utopian radicals and atheists, and on the right sat royalist Catholics. They differed on a fairly simple question: behead the king and persecute the Church—or restore the king and burn Robespierre at the stake. Of course, the wrong side won, but at least the stakes were clear. Ever since, the extension of Left/Right to more complex situations has done more harm than good.

This bipolar model casts political philosophy in terms of a two-sided tug-of-war. And we all know where a tug-of-