

Defending Tolerance

Values, liberty, and democracy

Loren E. Lomasky

Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice, by William Galston, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 137 pages, \$19

NOW THAT THE last smart bomb has fallen and soaring Predators have returned to their nests, it's time to put Iraq back together again. It will be no triumph for freedom if this President Bush's Gulf War ultimately concludes by replacing one defunct tyrant with some other autocratic strongman. Nearly everyone is agreed that Iraq must now join the family of democracies.

Because this is the Middle East, that's easier said than done. But even if somehow the circle gets squared and ballot boxes replace Ba'ath dungeons, that will not be sufficient to ensure the creation of a humane and civil Iraq. The Shi'ite community comprises some 60 percent of the Iraqi population. If it votes as a bloc, it will be capable of imposing its concept of the good society on all the other groups. The tables would thereby be turned on the formerly dominant Sunni community, with the Kurds, as ever, on the bottom. An Iraq with elections, even scrupulously free and fair elections, could easily place itself in the hands of medieval-minded mullahs and archaic ayatollahs.

Democracy is not a new idea. It achieved its first efflorescence some 2,500 years ago in Greece. Democratic Athens was a scintillating experiment in rule by the *demos*, the people. But things that scintillate are prone to burn out. Under the pressure of an extended military and economic

struggle with its great antagonist, Sparta, Athens' democracy imploded. Transient majorities came together in the Assembly to strike vicious blows at political opponents. Scapegoating and treachery abounded. The result was civil strife, defeat by the Spartans, and replacement of the discredited democracy by rule of the so-called Thirty Tyrants. The depressing story is spelled out with unmatched brilliance in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*. For centuries this was the classic text demonstrating the unworkability of democracy.

What was needed to make rule by the people effective was the addition of mechanisms to restrain those people from overreaching and destructively turning on themselves. However, if the restraining agent was something external to the governed, then the regime would be rule of but not by the people. So the democratic conundrum devolved into the question of how a polity not controlled by another could control itself. Division of powers, as with executive, legislature, and judiciary, was a good first step. It did not, however, directly address the *limits* of power. Is the body politic omnipotent in its ordinances, or is its reach somehow bounded? The answer proffered by John Locke, and by his successors in the liberal tradition, is that the individual is morally prior to the state and that people have rights to life, liberty, and property that must be respected. Majorities enjoy a prerogative to rule because collective decisions must be taken from time to time, but that prerogative is limited by individuals' rights.

Although it may run counter to contemporary demo-enthusiasms to say so, the best thing about democracy is that, of all political structures human beings have devised for themselves, it is the only one that has shown itself able over the long term to sustain societies in which most people enjoy a liberty to live their lives according to their own lights. It is *liberal* democracy, not the pure sovereignty of majorities, that merits plaudits, both here and in the Iraq of the future. But that is precisely why the task of political reconstruction will be so diffi-

famous in another world. In the early books of the series, the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry provided relief from the compulsive conformism of Harry's adoptive muggle family. With the return of Lord Voldemort, however, we see that the wizard world has its own status quo, one that the magical government, in the form of the Ministry of Magic, is reluctant to upset.

Indeed, Cornelius Fudge, the minister of magic, has had the magical media brand Harry an attention-seeking lunatic for his attempts to spread the word about the Dark Lord's return. Harry's chief antagonist for most of the book is not the self-consciously evil Voldemort or his acolytes, the Death Eaters, but the magical establishment, as represented at Hogwarts by the officious Dolores Umbridge.

Umbridge is a Nurse Ratched figure who, like so many government busybodies, is "here to help." Appointed professor of "defense against the dark arts" by ministerial fiat, she soon becomes High Inquisitor at Hogwarts, charged with ensuring that neither Potter nor the powerful Hogwarts headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, upsets the magical world's insistent denial of the ugly truth about Voldemort's return.

Yet as Sirius Black, Harry's wizard godfather, explains at one point, "the world isn't split into good people and Death Eaters." Umbridge and Fudge may be power hungry, but their malevolence is not the raw nihilism of a Voldemort. »

cult. Citizens will be quick to support governance exercised by their own kind—by majorities that enforce their ideas of proper religiosity, decorum between the sexes, and respect for ancestral custom. They will, however, be loath to permit deviant minorities to wander from widely acknowledged paths of rectitude. Critics will take the institutionalization of tolerance as evidence of a shameful disinclination to distinguish between excellence and mediocrity.

It is not only Islamic fundamentalists who share such sentiments. From politically correct exponents of proper genderspeak to William Bennett's virtuecrats, the urge to police personal behavior remains formidable here in democratic America. Even Locke himself endorsed laws that provide for the "direction of a free and intelligent agent to his proper interest," adding that it "ill deserves the name of confinement which hedges us in only from bogs and precipices." Why, then, should the state deny itself the power to drain bogs and fence off precipices so as to save the unwise and unwary from themselves?

Here is one answer: People have different concepts of the good life, and any attempt to impose one favored view will be contentious. Contention leads to war, and war is the antithesis of civil peace. So better to leave people to their own ways, wayward though they be.

Here is another response: We are fallible beings who do not always judge correctly concerning matters of right and wrong. Therefore we do well to let people go their own ways rather than take the risk of imposing on them what might be mistaken moral concepts.

These are creditable liberal motifs, sound as far as they go. However, they do not go far enough. On both of these lines, toleration is merely second best. If we knew what the good life is, and if we possessed a sufficient preponderance of force to impose it on others, we could legislate away the base and the shabby. Perhaps current democratic technologies are not sufficiently well-tuned to deliver such a happy consummation, but that is more an obstacle to overcome than a constraint carrying independent moral force. We are still looking for a positive case to be made on behalf of liberal toleration.

That case is offered by William Galston in *Liberal Pluralism*. Building on theories enunciated by Isaiah Berlin (and, a century earlier, by John Stuart Mill), Galston argues that there is no such thing as *the* good life. Rather, there are many good modes of human life, and no one of them outranks all the others.

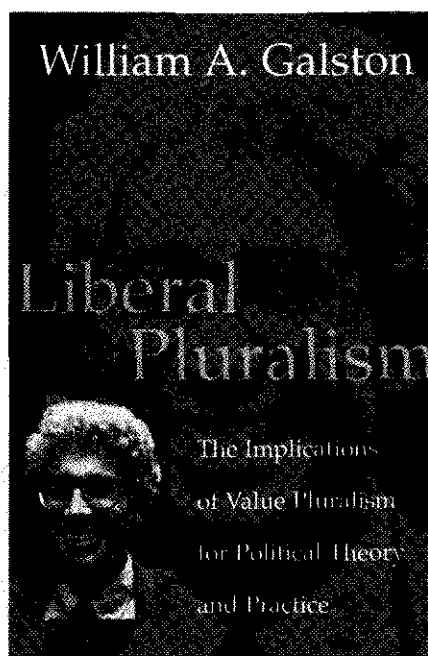
That is not because they are equally good or because goodness is simply in the eye of the beholder.

Rather, it is because some, though not all, values are *incommensurable*. *A* is incommensurable with *B* if it is not the case that *A* is better than *B*, *B* is better than *A*, or that *A* and *B* are equally good. Such incommensurability should not be understood as a reflection of our inability to make fine discriminations between divergent ways of life. Rather, there are no comparisons to be made because there is no common metric in terms of which all values can be graded. It is, as your third grade teacher explained, like trying to add apples and oranges. The sum does not compute.

Not only are different modes of activity incommensurable in their goodness, they also cannot be combined in one human life. It may be wonderful to be a bold corporate raider or to lead the detached life of a contemplative monk, but it would be ludicrous to switch between these on alternate Tuesdays. It's not only that one might get confused concerning whether it's time to pray or to prey. The commitments that underlie one way of life undercut the other. Even if one had unlimited time and all necessary skills, one would have to renounce some genuine goods.

But what I cannot incorporate in my own life can be vicariously appreciated in the activities of others. Because values are multiple and incommensurable, a liberal regime committed to supporting pluralism is superior to one wedded only to some particular conception of the good life. Its ends are not superior—incommensurability precludes such a judgment—but it does better by according respect to all the goods that merit it, not only the popular ones.

Galston argues intelligently for the theory of incommensurability and



its political corollaries. Unlike many contemporary liberals who maintain that individuals should be allowed to pursue whatever ends they wish just so long as they make their choices autonomously, Galston responds, "the promotion of personal autonomy, understood as choice based on critical rationalism, is not among the shared liberal purposes." Traditionalists merely accept rather than critically evaluate what has been handed down to them, but there are values inherent in traditional modes of life that cannot be achieved through critical reflection. *Not better goods—different goods.*

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Even among those who locate themselves squarely in the liberal camp, many draw the line with choices that impinge on the upbringing of children: You may devote yourself to whatever gods command your own allegiance, but you may not impose them on uncomprehending, defenseless minors. No one is better positioned, for better or worse, to affect the future well-being of children than their parents. Therefore, it is argued, even the liberal state has a considerable stake in superintending the conditions under which children are raised.

Whether or not parents approve, children must be afforded the capacity to appreciate a wide range of potential ways of life and to freely choose among them. This means, for example, that enclaves from moder-

nity such as Amish communities are suspect insofar as they propagate themselves from one generation to the next. It also indirectly buttresses a case for the public schools as an agency liberating children from the dead hand of their parents' past.

Galston, by contrast, defends parents' entitlement, within very broad limits, to bring up their children as they see fit; he is no proponent of sending the National Guard to liberate little Amish boys and girls. His defense of parents' rights is cogent bordering on eloquent. The discussion is notable in its own right, but all the more so because in between his encampments in ivory towers, Galston served as President Clinton's Deputy Assistant for Domestic Policy. Many of his colleagues in that administration were avid to extend the helping hand of government into family relationships. That Galston bids them halt is significant both theoretically and politically.

Nonetheless, the book retains traces of the dark side of Clintonism. At just the point at which Galston might be expected to observe that parental authority worthy of the name must extend to educational alternatives, he instead opines, "There is no compelling reason to believe that the emphasis I have placed on expressive liberty and the role of parents, if taken as the basis for actual policy, would significantly erode the dominant position the public schools now enjoy." The National Education Association's cheerleaders will applaud, but the rest of us should cringe. Nor am I reassured by Galston's rather cavalier dismissal of economic liberty's importance for individual self-determination.

Nonetheless, the planners of a postwar Iraq—not to mention postwar America—could do a lot worse than to consult this accessible and engaging essay. ■

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Umbridge is particularly insufferable precisely because her transformation of Hogwarts into an increasingly regulated panopticon is motivated by an apparently sincere self-righteousness.

A central theme of *The Order of the Phoenix*, then, is what Hannah Arendt called "the banality of evil." The bureaucrats are doing good by their own lights, following orders. Former Hogwarts prefect Percy Weasley is a case in point. In the past, Percy served as comic relief, a stuffed shirt whose obsequiousness toward authority figures was matched only by his imperiousness toward younger students. Now Percy is a Hogwarts graduate and assistant to Minister Fudge, and his blind affection for his masters leads him to join the smear campaign against Harry. The transition from buffoonish to sinister is seamless.

That is not to say that ministry officials, Umbridge in particular, lack a sadistic streak. She sentences Harry to detentions in which he must write "I will not tell lies" over and over again while the words are magically carved into the flesh of his arm, evoking Kafka's story "In the Penal Colony."

Umbridge's comeuppance, when it finally arrives, drives home a different truth about the nature of authority: Power over people ultimately relies on their own compliance. When the students and teachers, who had let Umbridge have the run of the school out of fear, finally

The Gipper and the Hedgehog

How an “amiable dunce” out-smarted the world

Glenn Garvin

Reagan's War: The Epic Story of His Forty Year Struggle and Final Triumph Over Communism, by Peter Schweizer, New York: Doubleday, 339 pages, \$26

THE INNATE AND possibly genetically mandated stupidity of Republicans has long been treated as established scientific fact; it is so utterly beyond dispute that even a ninth-grade dropout like Cher, who once thought Mount Rushmore's heads were natural formations, can publicly declare George W. Bush “lazy and stupid” without fear of embarrassment. But however great a moron the current president is said to be, his dimwittedness pales beside that of Ronald Reagan. Even hardened journalists and academics, long resigned to their toil among the ignorant, have recoiled before the feeble-mindedness of Reagan.

Haynes Johnson, for one, was so struck by Reagan's vegetable-level intelligence that he put it in the title of his history of the Reagan presidency, *Sleepwalking Through History*. Frances Fitzgerald took the title for her account of Reagan's Star Wars program, *Way Out There in the Blue*, from a crack in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* about the simpleton Willie Loman: “way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoe-shine.” Former JFK/LBJ whiz kid Clark Clifford called Reagan an “amiable dunce,” and historian Edmund Morris found Reagan's life so vapid that he actually made up characters and anecdotes in hopes of producing a more compelling biography.

Yet if there was an eggplant where Reagan's brain should have been, how did he manage to win the Cold War? How did he bring a victorious end to an ideological and military deadlock that defied Kennedy's best and brightest, Johnson's political cunning, Carter's brilliance (certified not only by his nuclear physics degree but also by an Evelyn Wood speed reading diploma), Eisenhower's strategic prowess, and even Nixon's widely acknowledged (if not always admired) skills as a back-alley fighter?

The general response among America's chattering classes has been that Reagan was the political equivalent of the millionth customer at Bloomingdale's. He was the guy lucky enough to walk through the door as the prize was handed out, as if everything was pre-ordained and would have happened the same way no matter whether the White House had been occupied by Michael Dukakis or George McGovern or Susan Sarandon. An alternative theory posits that Gorbachev was some sort of Jeffersonian kamikaze pilot, taking his whole nation over the cliff for the thrill of being proclaimed *Time's* Man of the Decade.

Oddly, that's not the way the Russians see it. Says Genrikh Grofimenko, a former adviser to Leonid Brezhnev, “Ninety-nine percent of the Russian people believe that you won the Cold War because of your president's insistence on SDI,” the Strategic Defense Initiative, as Star Wars was formally called. Grofimenko marvels that the Nobel Peace Prize went to “the greatest flimflam man of all time,” Mikhail Gorbachev, while Western intellectuals ignore Reagan—who, he says, “was tackling

world gangsters of the first order of magnitude.”

So how did Reagan do it? The answer, suggests Hoover Institution researcher and Cold War historian Peter Schweizer in his new book, *Reagan's War*, can probably be found in Isaiah Berlin's essay “The Fox and the Hedgehog.” Berlin, musing on an obscure line penned by the Greek poet Archilochus, argued it was a modern typology. Archilochus wrote that the fox knows many things, while the hedgehog knows one *big* thing. Berlin characterized foxes as running hither and yon, taking actions that are unconnected by any guiding principle and that may even be at odds with one another. “Hedgehogs, on the other hand,” writes Schweizer, “relate everything to a single central vision.”

Schweizer is not so unkind as to say so, but when it came to foreign policy, Jimmy Carter was the archetypal fox. Pulling the rug out from under right-wing regimes in Nicaragua and Guatemala, then arming theocratic fascist guerrillas in Afghanistan, he could never translate his supposedly superior intellect into coherent policy.

Unlike Carter, Reagan was never invited to contribute to foreign policy journals. But he knew one big thing: that freedom is the defining value of mankind, and communism was its antithesis. It was that, and not the arcana of missile throw weights or U.N. treaties, that defined Reagan's policy toward the Soviet Union. “Details that animate so many in the world of politics, academe, and journalism did not interest him so much as the ‘metaphysics’ of the Cold War,” observes Schweizer. “He was, in short, a hedgehog living in a world populated with foxes.”