
In Culture's Wake: Conservative Values in a Culture That Has Grown Antagonistic to Them

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When a future history of conservatism is written, perhaps the present period will be labeled the Era of Great Confusion. But it won't be confusion in the way it was during the 1930s and 1960s, when conservatives were plagued with uncertainty over their own ideological identity. Instead, the confusion today is much more muddled. It's a confusion reflected by this question: If everything's going so well, why do I feel so bad?

Maybe the only pessimists left in America, after six years of Dow Jones delight, are conservative writers and intellectuals. Even a cursory scan of the pages of *National Review* and *The Weekly Standard* and the opinion section of the *Wall Street Journal* reveals a gnawing pessimism about the social embrace of conservative values. But this pes-

simism—rooted in a perceived cultural hostility to core conservative values—has brought yet more ridicule upon conservative thinkers. How can they lament when we're living in a conservative age? the critics ask.

Then the litany is recited—the litany of facts meant to show that America is in a solidly conservative mood: Republican control of both houses of Congress; a balanced budget; welfare reform; all those Republican governors; laws that require schools to actually give tests, and so on. See? the critics say, conservatives are so out of touch they can't even see when things are going their way.

But the counterlitany is even longer: the continuing legality of partial-birth abortions; the increasing banishment of any public religious expression; the

mutating victimization virus infesting our legal system; the widespread and unquestioning application of labels like “mean-spirited” to conservatives; the erosion of respect for tradition and authority; the increasing regulation of politically incorrect speech; and the decline of civic virtue and its attendant values (honesty, self-restraint, personal responsibility, and honor).

Even though Bill Clinton proclaimed early in his presidency that the era of big government was over, the federal budget has grown by half a trillion dollars since he took office. Clinton’s 2001 budget not only surpassed the spending ceilings mandated by the Balanced Budget Act of 1997, but also set an all-time spending record. And Al Gore, in his presidential campaign, proposed the boldest expansion of the federal government since 1965—an expansion that would, within a decade, double the size of government.

Just a decade ago, it would have seemed inconceivable that a president who had dodged the draft and then lied about it would subsequently face virtually no public outrage when, at unbelievably convenient moments during his impeachment crisis, he ordered missile attacks against foreign countries (attacks that were never followed up with diplomatic or military action). Just a decade ago, it would have seemed inconceivable that the federal government, again without public outrage, would conduct an armed raid of a private home just so that it could send a young boy back to the communist country from which his mother died trying to escape. And just a decade ago,

it would have seemed inconceivable that a president would not even feel compelled to personally answer a corroborated charge of rape.

Perhaps the key to seeing through the confusion that currently grips conservatism is to look separately at the political and cultural spheres of American society. And when these two spheres are examined on their own, the source of the confusion begins to be seen. Conservatism may have flourished politically in recent years, but in the cultural arena it is withering. It was conservative economic policies that triumphed in the 1990s, not conservative cultural values. Though the country may be conservative in terms of being comfortable with the status quo, it is not conservative in terms of the values it supports.

Culture is the seedbed that produces the flowers (or weeds, depending on your perspective) of politics. Consequently, politics lags behind culture. It may be bare ground in April, but seeds are stirring that will produce a blooming garden in June. In contemporary American culture, however, the seeds that are sprouting are not ones that will yield conservative blooms.

The direction of American culture is not only unsupportive of conservative values, it is often directly antagonistic to those values. (The cultural war, it seems, has subsided into a steady retreat from conservatism.) But it should be noted at the outset that this cultural drift away from conservatism does not automatically mean a resurgence of the liberal agenda.

During the Era of Great Confusion, a rare compatibility has developed between liberals and conservatives: they have shared an ideological uneasiness. (How ironic it is that one of the purest of liberals, Nat Hentoff, has found a home in the editorial pages of one of the purest of conservative newspapers, the *Washington Times*.) Although liberals have succeeded in assisting the cultural erosion of conservative values, they have not succeeded in achieving political acceptance of their own.

Perhaps in acceptance of the unattainability of their own agenda, liberals focused during the Clinton presidency not so much on advancing their own cause as on undermining the conservative one. (This is in contrast to the 1980s, when conservatives almost single-mindedly pushed their own agenda.) But then, liberals haven't had to take many risks in opposing conservative values—they merely have had to exploit existing cultural trends, and let culture take it from there. Opponents of conservatism have not had to engage in overt ideological conflict; they have simply had to wage sporadic ambushes from a cultural jungle that has become inhospitable to conservative values.

There are many who argue that the erosion of both liberalism and conservatism is simply the result of an America becoming less partisan and ideologically confrontational. They cite Bill Clinton's "third way" as an in-between compromise, succeeding largely because the public no longer possesses the will to endure ideological battles.

Peace at any cost, in other words.

But just a quick glance at the combativeness of contemporary culture (road rage, litigation explosion, in-your-face attitudes) does much to discount the peace-at-any-cost theory. And a more careful examination reveals that a new cultural outlook is developing, and that this outlook (rather than being simply a desire for partisan peace) is the primary antagonist to conservative values.

In many respects, this new outlook is being formed out of the least attractive sides of both liberalism and conservatism. It is also, in turn, having different effects on the two ideologies. Though it is holding back liberalism, preventing it from becoming the dominant political ideology, it is actively eroding the cultural foundations of conservatism. And that erosion is most obviously taking place in the institutions of American social life.

A Weakening Institutional Foundation

The Decline of Institutions That Promote Conservative Values

Just as culture is the seedbed of politics, social institutions are the incubator of cultural attitudes. Hence, changes in those institutions have a ripple effect on cultural attitudes.

Throughout American history, conservative values have been fueled by the turbines of various social institutions. Religious organizations have shaped the conservative belief in civic virtue, in moral duties that transcend the law, and in the individual's subjection to a higher authority. (Indeed,

religion is probably the only social institution in which it is possible to be esteemed not despite but because of one's humility; and as such, it provides a vital antidote to the narcissism of America's celebrity-obsessed culture.) Community and charitable institutions have promoted social cohesion, assimilation, and community service. And patriotic organizations have reflected a social commitment to individual honor and national history. But as the twenty-first century begins, as Robert Putnam reveals in *Bowling Alone*, all of these institutions are in decline; and with that decline, the conservative values they have traditionally fostered have likewise been weakened.

Ranging from the PTA to the Jaycees to the Red Cross to the League of Women Voters, institutional membership is declining. Church attendance, except among fundamentalists, is down. (Sunday has become shopping and sports day.) Volunteerism, except among the aging parents of baby boomers, is down. Even philanthropy, despite the stock market rise, has dramatically shrunk as a proportion of national income. And patriotic organizations like the American Legion and VFW are withering away.

Along with this institutional decline there has simultaneously occurred a decline in influence. Religious organizations, for instance, are less engaged with the wider community, perhaps because the wider community is so much less reluctant to ridicule religion. Film directors rarely depict a religious character in a positive role, and artists rarely use anything

but body fluids to portray religious symbols. And without any great public outrage, Minnesota's Governor Jesse Ventura openly called religious people "weak-minded."

Even an institutional stalwart like the Boy Scouts is under attack. Because of the organization's beliefs on homosexuality, a group of young scouts who appeared on stage to lead the Pledge of Allegiance was booed at the 2000 Democratic convention. And although the Supreme Court upheld the Boy Scouts' First Amendment right of association to bar avowed gays as Scout leaders, the Clinton administration considered banning the Boy Scouts from using public facilities because of their beliefs, and numerous corporations and public school districts (including Minneapolis) have withdrawn their sponsorship of the organization. (Similar to its stance toward religious groups and beliefs, the rule of liberal tolerance seems to apply only to politically correct groups and beliefs.)

In his recent study of American society, Putnam documents the decline in civic engagement and loss of social connectedness. Though he recognizes the rise of new organizations (Greenpeace, for example), he shows that many are essentially lobbying and direct-mail operations, with little opportunity for active involvement of their members, and no membership requirement save the willingness to write a check. It is precisely the act of civic engagement, however, that strengthens the conservative values of community cohesion and civic virtue.

A Rising Institutional Hostility to Conservative Values

Education and the dismissal of history

Over the past decade, the field of education, and particularly higher education, has assumed a decidedly anti-conservative stance. Nowhere is this stance more evident than in the teaching of the humanities.

An appreciation for history traditionally has been considered vital for the survival of a democracy. As Abraham Lincoln said, "We cannot escape history." To conservatives, however, history is of even greater importance, since conservative values rely upon the lessons and wisdom of the past. But according to a recent study of colleges and universities released by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, none requires a course in American history, and only 22 percent require any kind of history course at all. Unsurprisingly, this institutional drift away from history has increased historical illiteracy among students. According to the same report, 80 percent of college seniors received a D or an F on a high-school-level test in American history. This historical illiteracy has created a void in the national consciousness—an empty space where throughout the ages tradition has bridged the generations.

Unfortunately, ignorance is only half the equation. As Jacques Barzun writes in his best-selling book *From Dawn to Decadence*, "when the nation's history is poorly taught in schools, ignored by the young, and proudly rejected by qualified elders, awareness

of tradition consists in only wanting to destroy it." And indeed, this is happening. Students attend schools in which they learn nothing about the past, except that it was wrong. Their teachers are not only ignoring history, they are attacking it. For many, the teaching of history has become merely another form of political advocacy against the very pillars of American heritage. As Robert Hughes noted in *Culture of Complaint*, an increasingly radicalized university is consciously reshaping the past for ideological purposes while ignoring the issue of truth.

Objective study of the past has given way to a political assault on the cultural heritage that has shaped Western civilization. History has become a rebellion against the past, rather than a means by which to study and preserve it. And with learning conducted in pursuit not of objective study but of certain political goals, as Roger Kimball argues in *The Long March*, "everything is sucked through the sieve of politics and the ideology of victimhood."

This hostility toward the past is also a legacy of the 1960s counterculture movement, as Harry Stein argues in *How I Accidentally Joined the Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy*. That generation, ever so confident of its own purpose, and having "little respect for the accumulated wisdom of the ages" imagined history to have been but a prelude for what it would accomplish. It saw its role not as continuing history, but as breaking with it. Perhaps this is why, unlike his predecessors, President Clinton rarely spoke of previous presidents, except to apologize for their mistakes.

The politicization of the humanities has occurred, in part, through a methodology known as “deconstruction.” Truth is seen as a mere delusion of the past; all arguments and writings are “deconstructed” so as to expose their racial, gender, and ethnic biases. The Great Books are condemned as biased tracts from an oppressive past. According to deconstructionists, there is no truth, only prejudice and bias—and the struggle for power.

This postmodern dismissal of truth was reflected in the Tawana Brawley hoax (Brawley was the black woman who falsely charged a white man with rape), when many scholars argued that it didn't matter whether Brawley was lying—all that mattered was that her story was “reflective” of racial abuse that had taken place in the past. And when Rigoberta Menchu's famous account of class warfare in Guatemala was revealed to be largely false, many professors said that the only thing that mattered was its “emotional truth.” In the conservative tradition, however, justice and freedom depend on society's pursuit of, and belief in, truth.

Conservative values are those that transcend the individual: values like objective truth and civic virtue and obedience to legal and moral duties—values that seek to elevate the individual to higher standards formulated outside the realm of the self. But the values coming out of the university today are just the opposite: values that are centered on the individual and subordinated to each person's life experiences—values that are geared to individual preferences, like tennis shoes or T-shirts.

Counterculture in the corporation

The epitome of the old-guard establishment was the corporate office. The signs of social hierarchy were the briefcase and the nameplate on the door. Critics saw corporate conformity as the great menace to a free society—the unyielding enemy of change. The “organization man” was the termite burrowing inside the grain of American democracy.

If labor unions and student activists were once seen as the pillars of liberalism, the corporation was considered the bastion of conservatism. On the ideological spectrum of American society, corporate executives and counterculturalists stood at the two extremes. Not so today.

Aside from sporadic attacks on whatever industry has the gall to throw a wrench of higher prices into the spinning flywheel of consumerism, the corporation enjoys a peaceful and supportive existence within American society. This existence stems from the escalating stock market, but also from the fact that corporate culture has adopted many of the attitudes of its once fiercest opponent—the 1960s counterculture.

Just listen to the corporate messages that try to shape American behavior. “The world has boundaries, ignore them,” proclaims an Isuzu advertisement, as one of its vehicles crashes into a huge sign that says “Rules.” Foster Grant uses the refrain “no limits.” Merrill Lynch “knows no boundaries.” Burger King says that “sometimes you gotta break the rules.” Outback Steakhouse: “No rules. Just right.” Neiman

Marcus: "No rules here." Columbia House Music Club: "We broke the rules." It's almost as if corporate America was the mouthpiece for the attitudes of the Clinton administration.

Through the consumer marketplace, rebellion has become the mass-cultural motif of the age. In the 1960s, hippies and yuppies and draft card burners were preaching rebellion in America's streets. Today, that rebellion is being sold on prime-time television.

Not just in its advertising, but in its very identity has the corporation become infused with the 1960s counterculture. It has embraced the free-wheeling informality ("casual days"), the indifference to authority, and the defiant individualism associated with the 1960s leftists. Though "Just do it!" was a blunt call for sexual freedom in the 1960s, it is a shoe ad slogan today. And the New Age thirst for self-actualization now finds fulfillment in luxuriating in the tingle of that new shampoo, and finds expression in "I'm worth it" and "I deserve it."

Corporations go out of their way to pretend that they have nothing to do with that unseemly little matter of profit-making, and retailers are constantly scrambling to find new ribbons for new diseases to fight. Those companies that donate to liberal causes proudly publicize it, while those with conservative orientations try to hide it.

The modern consumer culture has become the fulfillment of 1960s calls for a more individualistic-centered society—a society catering almost exclusively to self-indulgence. More than at any other time in the past (and

certainly more than during the 1950s and 1980s), American identity is tied up with consumption. What kind of latte do you take? What can your Palm do? How impregnable is your SUV? What designer do you wear? How many channels do you get?

The transformation of consumerism from a stigma of greed to a celebrated indulgence can be seen in the contrasting views of the 1980s and the 1990s. Even though corporate salaries in the 1990s skyrocketed beyond those of the 1980s (and though amidst all this wealth the rate of charitable contributions actually declined), it was the 1980s that was depicted as the "decade of greed." Though by the end of the 1990s the savings rate had turned negative, a 5 percent rate during the 1980s was bemoaned by the media as a sign of America's decline. Though both consumer and corporate debt hit record highs during the 1990s, as did purchases of luxury items, it was the 1980s that was seen as the decade of excess. And though a 1987 *Time* magazine cover story proclaimed "What's Wrong: Hypocrisy, Betrayal and Greed Unsettle the Nation's Soul," the magazine said nothing similar about the 1990s; it even named the multibillionaire CEO of Amazon.com (a company that had yet to turn a profit) 1999 Person of the Year.

As the twenty-first century begins, there is no sign of any counterculture protest of American consumerism. Perhaps that is because the corporation has become sufficiently fused with countercultural attitudes; it has become an ally in the breakdown of conservative values.

Media erosion of conservative values

The debate on ideological bias in the media needs no further fuel. Aside from the specific content of media messages, however, the mere existence and operation of the modern media have had a profoundly corrosive effect on conservative values.

Marshall McLuhan said that “the medium is the message.” And this has proved especially true with regard to its impact on the cultural values of its audience. The modern media, as they proliferate through the Internet and out over satellites, have shortened the public’s attention span, provided an increasingly ubiquitous distraction from contemplative thought, and elevated emotion over logic as the basis for public opinion-making.

Screens of electronic data and images are everywhere. Looming over Times Square. Pulsating from handheld computers. Endlessly changing within Internet menus. And in the midst of this millisecond delivery of electronic images, what is the continual demand from computer makers? More speed. A three- or four-second delay in reaching a Web site has become cause for fist-pounding and expletive-shouting.

It’s all so fast, spoiling us with immediate information. Lulling us into believing a turn of a switch or a click of a mouse is all that’s needed to get immediate answers to all our questions. This immediacy, however, discourages contemplative thought. Time horizons are shrunk to the moment at hand. The act of watching, which the contemporary media culture encourages, is an act confined to the present.

But conservatism demands a sense of history. It demands that the past be used as a guidepost for both the present and the future. It requires that the past be more than just the subject of an occasional movie, and that it be relevant to more than just antique shops. As James Bryce wrote in *The American Commonwealth*, “A people consumed by a feverish activity that gives little opportunity for reflection, seems most of all to need to have its horizon widened, its sense of awe and mystery touched, by whatever calls it away from the busy world of sight and sound into the stillness of faith and meditation.”

The sensory-numbing pace of the media in modern society creates a sort of intellectual disengagement from life. The mind becomes like a catcher’s mitt, just trying to grab all the information that gets thrown its way, rather than like a batter, trying to discern just the right pitch to hit. And this disengagement distances the individual from public life and allows her to be manipulated by emotion-tugging images.

The shortened attention span induced by the modern media tends to elicit an emotional reaction, rather than logical reasoning, since emotion is grounded in the immediate present (as only our minds are capable of experiencing the past). This preference of emotion over logic undermines conservatism, especially given the conservative belief in ideas.

It is a well-known, though obviously oversimplified, stereotype that conservatives rely on their minds and liberals on their hearts. Yet it is also a stereotype to which liberals often refer. In recent

years, for instance, liberals have made the charge that conservatives do not have “enough heart”; and Bill Clinton’s presidential campaigns rested largely on an emotional appeal (“I feel your pain”). Conservative values (objective truth, self-restraint, civic virtue, moral responsibility), however, require intellectual rigor and discipline more than they do emotional involvement.

As an ideology grounded in logical reasoning, conservatism requires intellectual clarity. The rapid pace of the media age, however, encourages vague and generalized emotional images. Health care is always called “a crisis” and a “national emergency,” although the exact nature of the crisis is never defined. Just as during impeachment, when it warned of a “national agony,” the Clinton administration stoked the public’s emotional fears about health care and then pandered to those fears by saying that “something must be done.” It is the same emotional approach that is used to cast everything from tax issues to foreign policy in terms of “child welfare.” Likewise, the labeling of abortion as simply a matter of choice has clouded over a striking cognitive dissonance within the American public. While almost 60 percent say abortion is murder, nearly the same number think it should nonetheless be legal.

As an ideology that applies the enduring traditions of the past to the public concerns of the present and future, conservatism tends to take a longer-range and perhaps more gradualistic approach. Unlike those who seek the quick fix of new laws to

address long-standing problems like violence and campaign finance, conservatives tend to advocate full enforcement of existing laws before new ones are passed. Conservatives, as in the case of gun violence, also look beyond the legal system to cultural factors that contribute to a problem. But this more deliberate and wider-focused approach is often rejected by a public with a short time horizon and a low attention span—a public inflamed with emotional rhetoric and tempted by immediate solutions.

In a culture of shortened attention spans, the immediate lure of new government programs crowds out the more complex consideration of the size and role of government in a democratic society. The emotional appeal of specific benefits and poll-driven tax credits aimed at swing voters overwhelms the more abstract, intellectual notions of limited government.

There is a sponge effect to the increasing presence of the media in American life. A door is opened to a dark and empty room, and the first act is to reach for the remote. In an instant, silence and solitude are obliterated. Our reality is immediately shifted to the television or computer screen. But the more we look to the media for our reality, the more addicted we become to their distractions, and the less engaged we become in real life.

The degree to which media reality is replacing experiential reality can be seen in the cult of celebrity now so prevalent in America. People are celebrated not for what they have accomplished, but for the mere fact of their

receiving media coverage. An example is the celebrity status of Darva Conger, who got married on *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire*, or the “contestants” on *Survivor*, or the throngs of people who congregate outside the *Today* show when the cameras are rolling.

A cult of celebrity, as has arisen in the modern media age, spawns a voyeuristic audience. It’s as if we turn on the television to see real life, to experience the mess of life without getting up from our easy chairs; because, in an age of inauthenticity, video seems more real to us than actual life.

But the cult of celebrity isn’t confined to Hollywood. It has been injected into politics, where personality now counts for more than character. The 2000 Democratic convention, for instance, was all about giving Al Gore personality—all about turning him into a celebrity like Bill Clinton.

Further evidencing that the line between politics and entertainment has been blurred, approximately 50 percent of Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine get their political news from late-night comedy shows like *The Tonight Show* (according to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press), and more than a quarter of all adults obtain their news from such programs. The danger, then, is that the public will act toward politics as it does toward everything else that is on television: it will simply become passive voyeurs.

All this vicarious living has done great damage to conservative values. Heroism is confused with celebrity, true achievement with popularity. The

past disappears as quickly as yesterday’s television schedule. What is promoted is not humility, spirituality, and a sense of community, but unrestrained egos, blatant materialism, and a self-centered “I’ve-gotta-be-a-winner” combativeness. Moreover, the isolation of people into passive media observers erodes faith in the power of social community, leaving only the government as a viable agent of public endeavor.

The New Cultural Ideology

The changing institutions of American life have helped erode conservative values, but there is more than just an erosion taking place. There is also a replacement—a new cultural mind-set of egocentrism is crowding out the conservative ideology.

This egocentrism is like a philosophical extraction of consumerism. Its vision is narrow. It does not address the structure of social institutions or the relations among governments. Instead, it looks only to indulging the individual. The rise of the self-help industry is indicative of egocentrism, as is the growth of America’s therapy culture—a culture that is all about self (self-actualization and self-fulfillment).

Nearly every aspect of American culture revolves around the world of the self. Novels explore interior lives. Memoirs and self-help books are best-sellers. (Indeed, perhaps that’s the problem facing the publishing industry: everyone’s too busy writing their own books to read anyone else’s.) The most popular magazines (like *People*, *Self*, and *O, the Oprah Magazine*) are all about self. Art focuses not on the world

outside the individual but on the emotional turmoil inside. Psychologists have become the modern-day explorers. Elections are about soccer moms. Television overflows with talk shows serving as individual confessionals and therapy sessions.

Just as in the market economy, where the consumer is always right, so too in the mind-set of modern egocentrism is the individual the sole and celebrated authority. This individualism is not defined in the conservative sense, along with civic duties and moral responsibilities, but rather in a consumer sense whose only purpose is self-gratification.

Egocentrism vaults beyond the political freedom of the individual and into the sphere of lifestyle liberation and personal fulfillment. It is a marriage of New Age self-actualization, 1960s countercultural sexual liberation, and 1990s consumerism. It is a cappuccino culture of customized choice. As David Frum points out in *How We Got Here*, it is a permissive and hedonistic culture

that is engulfed in its own feelings and contemptuous of intellectual rigor, that gives priority to the self over the community and believes the inner life of each self to be of infinite interest to all others, that distrusts government yet expects beneficence from it, and that is permeated at all levels by a potent sense of entitlement.

Egocentrism is at odds with most conservative values. The words service and duty are not a part of the egocentric vocabulary. Self-pity replaces self-sacrifice, and an obsession with

personal freedom replaces the more collective ethos of the past. In an egocentric culture, free competition, instead of being a condition for achievement, is an opportunity for self-adulation and taunting one's opponent ("I kicked some butt").

A culture of the self is also a present-tense culture. Just as egocentrism constricts a society's spacial view (confining its worldview to what happens in the kitchens of soccer moms rather than what happens in the legislative halls of foreign governments), so too does it narrow its temporal vision. Egocentrism shuts its eyes to the past, since in the great story of human progress any one individual tends to pale—and in a culture of the self, nothing is greater (not even human history) than the needs and feelings of the individual.

An egocentric outlook characterized the Clinton presidency. On the surface, it often appeared as if Clinton adopted a political style that was completely anti-ideological, oriented only to the practical needs of soccer moms. But his "third-way triangulation" wasn't just an avoidance of ideology; it was the expression of an egocentric creed, with its corresponding brand of consumer politics. His promises were to individual, not collective, interests—the ultimate fulfillment of the 1960s countercultural mantra: "the personal is political."

Bill Clinton's politics became one of building consumer dependency. He kept his poll numbers high by making sure that every constituency was promised some little treat at the governmental grocery store. Clinton's State

of the Union addresses became increasingly long shopping lists for the political consumer. His 2000 address, for instance, proposed seventy-three new programs—a number that increased to eighty-three in his final budget.

It's no coincidence that Clinton's pollster, Mark Penn, who also advised some of America's largest corporations on how to market their products to the American consumer, helped Clinton develop his politics as a company would develop a product line. This was why Clinton's political rhetoric increasingly took on the poll-tested language of product marketing.

By incorporating the valueless consumer culture into the nation's political culture, however, Clinton also incorporated the amorality of consumerism—the focus on immediate gratification (a focus that has produced dramatic increases in consumer debt and bankruptcies). He stoked the many small appetites of rapacious consumers: seeking not to lead citizens, but to satisfy consumers. But this in turn has also made Americans dependent, as consumers often are. It has made them as dependent on their government as they are on their local coffeehouse.

Recent polls have shown a significant increase in those who favor larger government providing more services. Even though America is in the most prosperous period of its history, Americans are becoming more dependent on their government. In 1996, 61 percent of Americans preferred “smaller government with fewer services.” Four years later, however, a dramatic change had taken place. Only 46 percent

wanted smaller government. Polls taken during the 2000 presidential campaign showed that a majority of voters embraced Al Gore's proposed \$2.7 trillion expansion of the federal government—an expansion beyond anything that has ever been proposed in a presidential campaign. And like Clinton, Gore offered voters not an overarching vision of political society, but an array of benefits aimed at various consumer groups (a \$10,000 tuition tax credit, a Medicare assumption of prescription drug costs).

An egocentric, consumer politics reflects the banality of the ever-demanding self that inevitably ends in a government program. Its self-absorption produces a superficial sentimentality of the kind that wants government to fix every problem. And, in a never-ending cycle, the dependency it breeds flows from the social isolation caused by a culture of the self.

Political Effects of Egocentrism

Emotion Substituting for Logic

According to David Frum, America has become infected with a mood that “celebrates the emotive and intuitive, and denigrates the rational and the intellectual.” It is a society engulfed in its own feelings, translating most political issues into the simple language of love and hate. It is a society in which the local school, which may have a leaking roof, has a resident team of counselors.

In an egocentric culture, reasoning is quickly pushed aside by emotion. Logic is seen as a somewhat tired remnant of

the past, an oppressive system that is unconcerned with human feelings, a system in which the individual is subject to the unrelenting rules of reasoning. It is also a system that takes the individual outside of herself. There is no individuality in logic: people are not celebrated for who they are or how they feel, only for how well they apply the rules of logic. With egocentrism, however, everything outside of the individual is downgraded. All that matters is self-esteem and emotional contentment.

By providing a common channel for decision-making, logic has traditionally been associated with the public sphere. Emotion, on the other hand, takes people into themselves, to a place in which no one else can truly share; and for this reason, emotion has traditionally been linked to the private sphere. Consequently, the more our politics is based on emotion, the less vibrant and effective it will be. (Indeed, in an emotionally laden politics, Bill Clinton was able to categorize impeachment issues as strictly private ones, thereby derailing the constitutional process.)

One of conservatism's central tenets is that emotion is best left out of the political arena. The role of government is to address narrow and specific grievances, not to assuage permanent emotional needs. Love, generosity, and compassion are virtues best practiced by private individuals, not public bureaucracies. Perhaps Clinton's deepest legacy, however, is the conflation of feeling with governing. He was elected not because he had thought through Social Security reform, but because he felt our pain. His

was a politics less about legislating than about "healing" and "journeys"—a politics in which gestures of empathy masqueraded as a public agenda. It was an empty politics that sought to focus attention only on the depth of his feeling, the heartfulness of his concern. But then, Bill Clinton's genius was not in shaping American culture, only in reflecting it; his political style was the perfect expression of a banal, self-oriented culture.

This style was particularly evident at the 2000 Democratic convention. Rather than spend time raising money for his party to use in the upcoming elections, Clinton devoted his last convention to sucking up an estimated \$10 million for his own presidential library. And rather than gracefully cede the spotlight, as Ronald Reagan did, Clinton remained in Los Angeles for days, parading about in the company of Barbra Streisand, Steven Spielberg, and other celebrity flatterers.

That same convention also revealed the degree to which emotion has taken over political dialogue and identity. The Gore children testified as to how fun and cuddly their father was. The actor Tommy Lee Jones said that when Al and Tipper "come to our house, they sit in each other's lap, hold hands, and even smooch occasionally." Then, when Al joined Tipper on stage, he grabbed her for a back-seat-in-my-Chevy-van kind of kiss, prompting Joe and Hadassah Lieberman to have their own go at it. Not surprisingly, after that lover's lane moment, Al Gore's acceptance speech began with a tribute to marital devotion.

The problem with emotion is that it provides a weak basis on which to govern. There is no clear commonality with emotion. Each person feels in his or her own way. Consequently, a public discourse based on emotion can be a muddled and vague discourse (in which the word combat is replaced by the phrase “the introduction of troops into a nonpermissive environment”).

Ambiguous language is the expression of emotion, because emotion doesn't have to be understood—it only has to be accepted and empathized with. Yet when words cease to serve as the tool of intellectual clarity, they can provide an escape hatch from accountability (i.e., “truthful but misleading”). Take, for instance, the artful obscurity in the way the White House described more than 100 coffees for donors as not fund-raisers but “donor maintenance” affairs. Accountability is avoided because a vague and meaningless public discourse forces people out of the public sphere and back into the cocoon of their private lives.

Intentions Substituting for Reality

When public discourse is based more on emotion than on intellect, good intentions often become an end in themselves. Bill Clinton, for instance, got credit for supporting affirmative action, not for making it work. And Al Gore was continually able to dismiss allegations of past fund-raising violations by promising to support future campaign finance reform.

Likewise, Hillary Clinton's Senate campaign seemed to rest almost exclusively on the degree of her concern, the

heartfeltness of her convictions, and the depth of her feeling. She cared about what New Yorkers cared about—that was the message of her candidacy—whatever it was that New Yorkers cared about. She was emphatically in favor of doing more to “support people,” although she never said what kind of specific support she favored, and she certainly never talked about anything as specific as the health care plan she had proposed seven years earlier. But as the Clinton presidency demonstrated, voters will forgive an awful lot in a politician who can manage to say convincingly that she really cares.

With a politics of emotion, good intentions acquire a life of their own, immune from any reality check. Hollywood celebrities like Warren Beatty speak out about income inequities in the United States. He criticizes doctors, who spend half their adult life in school and who only start making money by the time most movie stars are multimillionaires. Yet you never see Beatty saying that the stage crew should make as much as the star.

Noble intentions are becoming an identity mark, just like a designer label. The plight of the poor is decried, yet charitable donations are down. Capital punishment is opposed, except when a dramatic enough crime takes place. Greed is condemned, but never if one's own income is concerned. When Barbra Streisand (who is constantly decrying the greed of conservatives) decided to auction off a pair of Gustav Stickley-designed cabinets, the director of a preservation foundation wanted her to donate them to their original home.

But Streisand sold them anyway, doubling her investment. When the incident became news, she promised to donate an unspecified “part of the profits” to an unspecified charity.

It almost seems as if liberals are living in some kind of Hollywood-like cocoon—as if reading the script is the same as living the scene. As if the script of their intentions becomes a substitute for the actual achievement of their goals. As if blindly supporting enrollment quotas is equivalent to better educating the children. As if just saying the word diversity is tantamount to achieving equal opportunity for all. And yet, this approach has seemed to work: intentions have become actions.

The Slide into Sentimentalism

With emotion prevailing over intellect, an unthinking sentimentalism replaces demanding moral principles and logical reasoning. Such a sentimentalism was at work during the Elian Gonzalez affair. Under the sentimental wish for Elian and his father to have a loving reunion, the public disregarded the government’s gunpoint seizure of him from the home of his relatives. The public ignored the ways in which the government had not followed legal procedures in breaking into the home of a law-abiding family. The public forgot about how Elian’s mother had died trying to save her son from communism, and it quietly accepted President Clinton’s proud announcement that “the law has been upheld.”

Sentimentalism was also at work during the war over Kosovo. Only a naive sentimentalism would think that

twelve weeks of high-altitude bombing would bring a loving, harmonious, and multicultural society to the Balkans. Only a naive sentimentalism, fed by the nostalgic heroism of *Saving Private Ryan*, would see Kosovo as a chance to make up for Vietnam, as a war that America could be proud of—a war about which someone might someday make a movie.

American sentimentalism feels bad for an inmate, but executes him anyway. It thinks passing a hate crimes law actually reduces hate, and that an apology is equivalent to justice. It weeps if one animal is injured, but thinks nothing of the slaughter that is partial-birth abortion. And it often elevates small, contrived crises to matters of grave social importance, as during the filming of *Men in Black*, when the American Humane Association counted out 200 roaches a day onto the set and checked them back in at night, to make sure that not a single one had been harmed.

Bill Clinton’s frequent, though vapid, references to various conservative values present yet another illustration of empty sentimentalism. Polls told him that Americans enjoy hearing words like responsibility, and so he tossed them out—without any real force or meaning, just for that warm feeling of nostalgia. And in so doing, he revealed how in many respects conservative values have become these little Currier & Ives prints that everyone likes to look at every once in a while, whenever a nostalgic mood hits.

Sentimentalism, however, is a sign of moral retreat into a make-believe

world—a world free from harsh realities and the responsibility for those realities, a world that rushes to lay teddy bears outside the homes of deceased celebrities.

Emotions Stifling Debate

When public discourse loses connection to the objective guidelines of logic, the political arena sinks into a pit of emotional slander and innuendo.

There currently exists an emotional correctness, defined by conservatives' opponents, that labels conservatives as unquestionably incorrect. It's the hating right against the loving left. And because conservatives are the presumed practitioners of hate, no slur or insult is out of bounds. Indeed, a search of the New York Times archives found over 100 mentions of the phrase "mean-spirited," although not once was it used to refer to a liberal.

A public discourse based on emotion, however, is one that can easily descend to the stoking of fear. And the more horrifying the fear, the more it seems to be believed. In 1996, after a number of fires at black churches, President Clinton proclaimed that a conspiracy of racial hate was to blame and compared the fires with ethnic violence in Rwanda and Bosnia. Even though he had no evidence of conspiracy, Clinton said it was "clear that racial hostility is the driving force behind . . . these incidents."

In the days following, his administration continued to claim that the country was in the grip of "an epidemic of terror . . . inspired by a resurgence of racial hatred and with clear conspir-

atorial overtones." Democrats blamed conservative Republicans, suggesting that the fires were the result "of a climate of metastasizing racism inspired by conservative attempts to end affirmative action, to push hard-line policies on crime, and to radically reform the welfare system." The Reverend Jesse Jackson said that conservatives "had by their actions created a climate that was directly responsible for the church burnings."

Yet after all the fear-mongering died down, USA Today conducted an exhaustive study of the fires and did not find anything to support the idea of a national conspiracy, or any active involvement of hate groups, or even a general increase in racial animosity among whites toward blacks. And after employing one of the largest task forces since the civil rights years, the Justice Department found no racial conspiracy. Still, even after the task force had issued its report, Vice President Al Gore declared that "1996 was a terrifying year, [when] we witnessed a blaze of violence that seared the nation's conscience."

Two years later, the same fears were still being stoked. During the congressional elections of 1998, and in the midst of the Clinton impeachment, Missouri Democrats ran an ad on black radio that said, "When you don't vote, you let another church explode." And Clinton's Justice Department, without a shred of evidence, charged that Republicans were planning to "intimidate" black voters at the polls. (After the elections, no instances of such intimidation were reported.)

There seem to be no inhibitions to the emotional slurs that get thrown at the "hateful" conservatives. When word was leaked during the 2000 Democratic convention that a new grand jury had been convened to consider whether President Clinton should be indicted for perjury, Democrats unleashed a barrage of attacks: "You can bet your bottom dollar that the Republican Party was behind this leak," Representative David Bonior said; "It's a Republican dirty trick," pronounced Representative Charles Rangel. Later, it was disclosed that a Democratically appointed judge had inadvertently committed the leak.

Hypocrisies of an Egocentric Politics

A political discourse centered on emotion rather than logic is also one that tolerates inconsistency and hypocrisy. Leaders are judged only by emotional standards, not intellectual ones. But the end result is that they become immune from accountability.

An egocentric politics, with a public realm gutted of logical reasoning, causes a disconnect between individual behavior and public pronouncements. Al Gore calls himself a champion of the disadvantaged, even though the tenants in his own rental building lived amidst running sewage; he claims to have been an anti-tobacco crusader, even as he was growing tobacco on his family farm and accepting campaign donations from tobacco companies.

Celebrities push for outlawing guns, yet hire armed bodyguards. Abortion protesters face restrictions that would never be applied to other demonstra-

tors. Men are banned from classes taught by feminist professors. Art offensive to religion is proudly displayed at colleges with speech codes prohibiting politically incorrect language. Republicans are criticized for not being open on abortion, even though Democrats are unquestioningly intolerant of pro-life attitudes. A college student who laughs at an anti-gay remark must write a paper on homophobia, even though no such penalty is ever imposed on mockers of religion.

Somehow, perhaps because of their "emotional correctness," the supporters of these hypocrisies are never called to account. Perhaps because they have discarded a political dialogue of logic, they are not subject to its oversight. Perhaps they are immune from accountability because they have acquired the franchise on the correct image—it is their opponents who are mean-spirited practitioners of the politics of hate. And if conservatives try to answer emotion with logic, they are accused of "going negative." Emotion is healthy; logic is hateful.

A Sinking Egalitarianism

In an egocentric culture, no person can be made to feel inadequate or inferior or incapable. Political equality isn't enough; cultural equality is also required. But this new cultural egalitarianism has had the effect of lowering cultural expectations to the lowest common denominator and of creating cultural standards that make no demands on the individual. It is an egalitarianism that seeks to promote equality from the bottom up.

Underworld chic is the rage of the fashion world. Designers strive for the “homeless” look, the prison-garb look, and the red-light-district look. In the Bloomingdales catalog, skimpy little dresses for skinny little girls appear in the sort of animal prints more suited for streetwalkers than hop scotchers.

Televised wrestling has become a free fall into brutality and pornography; and in rap music, as in so many of the violence-studded movies, evil has become cool. Literature panders to the jaded amorality that is ever so trendy now. High-culture art has been abandoned in favor of arts and crafts, especially if they are the work of culturally sanctioned victims. Museums, having given up the quest for beauty and truth, promote exhibitions that strive only to shock—exhibitions like *Sensation* (which included statues of children with genitals on their faces and a dung-spattered Virgin Mary surrounded by pornographic images) and *Van Gogh’s Ear* (which included a toy Jesus wearing a condom, and a film of a menstruating woman taking a shower).

On national television, people unhesitatingly bare the most vulgar and grotesque moments of their lives to Geraldo or Jerry. In the shameless pursuit of “reality programming,” NBC plans to air *Chains of Love*, in which someone is chained for five days to several persons of the opposite sex who are released one by one until only one is left—and then the two go on a date. Then there is the Fox project, *Love Cruise*, in which sixteen single persons, eight of each sex, go on a cruise, during which, according to the network,

“cameras will capture every tantalizing moment.” And finally, there’s Court TV’s *Confessions*—real-life videotaped confessions of rapists and murderers. But as George Will wrote in *The Morning After: American Successes and Excesses*, “a public incapable of shame and embarrassment about public vulgarity is unsuited to self-government.”

In a culture increasingly looking downward, teenage bodies and adolescent attitudes become society’s Holy Grail, so much so that adults have begun sedulously aping teens. Even pregnant women in their forties are wearing low-waisted pants and baring their midriffs, as if they were Britney Spears onstage. Consequently, though they may decry from time to time the R-rated life that many teenagers live, adults should realize that they are complicit in encouraging some of the very ills they condemn in teenage society.

Indeed, egocentrism has spawned a culture gripped by an adolescent obsession with sex—a cleavage culture, in which no television sitcom needs to do anything but dwell explicitly on the subject of sex—a culture in which Victoria’s Secret catalogs qualify as magazines. But, as its supporters note, it is a culture that leaves no one out and passes no judgment, a culture in which all can feel good about their lifestyles.

An egocentric culture trades moral imperatives for the appeasement of individual emotions. The shelves of bookstores and the messages of talk shows are all about self-improvement, but it is a self-improvement that is rooted in the banality of self-comfort. It is a self-improvement that is devoid

of any clear sense of what constitutes improvement. And it is a self-improvement that is really only a masquerade for self-reverence.

In a culture of mandated egalitarianism, victimhood is the exalted social status, because victimhood is the only status everyone can share. Single mothers, for instance, are not praised for what triumphs they achieve, but simply for being "single moms."

This exaltation of the victim, however, often results in the escalation of petty disappointments into dramatic, victim-making injustices, such as when a Miss Colorado claimed that her titleholder's contract, which required her to be available at all pageant-affiliated events, amounted to "a form of slavery."

The lowering of cultural standards reflects a sort of resigned contentment to match expectations with an ever declining reality (a reality in which people celebrate sports championships by burning and pillaging their own cities). For most of the twentieth century, for instance, the debate over youthful well-being covered a broad social terrain, as Barbara Dafoe Whitehead observed in her study on contemporary sex education. The deliberations of the decennial White House Conference on Children, which began in 1909 and ended in the early 1970s, ranged widely from improving health and schooling to building character and citizenship. Today, however, public ambitions for adolescent well-being are much narrower. As a consequence, public debate on the nation's youth has come down to a few questions: How do we keep boys from killing? How do we

keep girls from having babies? And how do we limit the social havoc caused by adolescent acting-out? It's a mentality that blamed the police for the June 2000 incident in Central Park, where roving gangs of young men groped some forty-seven women.

Perhaps nowhere have society's standards and expectations been lowered as they have been toward the nation's most honored office—the presidency. (Indeed, Bill Clinton became the first president to be strengthened by charges of illegality and immorality: the lower his personal behavior sank, the higher his approval ratings soared.) But what is even more troubling, though not surprising, is that the example set in the White House has filtered down to the rest of society. This cultural seepage was exemplified by the Chicago high school that cheated to win an academic contest.

Just as lying about sex was what everybody did, cheating to win a contest was "simply the way the world works," one of the participants explained. Just as their president had blamed his troubles on a vast right-wing conspiracy, the accused students initially claimed that they were the victims of snob assumptions that a school such as theirs could never achieve so brilliantly. Later, in justifying the cheating, some students said that the contest was stacked against them, and in favor of certain prestigious private schools. And, of course, they blamed their accusers of hypocrisy, citing a previous conviction of a school board president for income tax evasion. Finally, when one of the

cheaters was asked how she would react if her own child cheated in school, she answered: "It depends."

A Materialistic Moralism

Much has been made of the moral relativism of contemporary culture. (Much also has been made of the various causes of this relativism: a victimization mentality that relieves individuals of responsibility; a therapy that assures us that there is no such thing as a moral problem, just one of psychological confusion, for which the only cure is counseling.) But there exists more than just a reluctance to engage in moral judgment—modern society has traded in moral man for economic and psychological man.

In a culture of the self, the supreme value has become sensory pleasure and materialistic comfort. While the Founders once asked "What kind of individual can best protect a democracy?" the question asked today is "What kind of government can provide the benefits that individuals desire?"

Materialism has become the defining feature of our times—not just in the property sense, but in the moral sense as well. The issues that get characterized as moral issues are those associated with our materialistic and physical well-being. Teen smoking is tightly regulated, but teen sex is largely ignored. Regular attendance at a health club is seen as a mark of individual well-being, but regular attendance at a church or synagogue is not. The therapeutic culture mandates full and open self-disclosure of one's emotions, yet one is expected to keep quiet about

one's religious beliefs. A political candidate's college report cards can be analyzed, but not her moral beliefs. Vice is redefined as disease, and virtue as intolerance. Guilt is what one feels about eating a high-calorie muffin or paying full retail, not what one should be plagued with in the wake of a lie or betrayal. Pornography is free speech, yet opposition to affirmative action is hate. Prenatal health care is a moral issue, but abortion is not. Drug use is a social problem, but not a moral one. Repression of one's emotions is wrong, yet lying is . . . well, it depends.

Even when the word values is used, it is used in such a sterile and trivial sense as to rob it of any meaning. It is used in discussing environmental regulations, but almost never in discussing individual conduct or moral beliefs. Indeed, "values" are now as easy to acquire as an extra-large double latte—all one has to do is voice the correct political preference and write the properly designated check. All one has to do is pick the right (or, more accurately, the left) coffeehouse. ("I am progressive, therefore I am virtuous.")

Under a materialistic moralism, traditional moral values are downgraded to the level of any other issue or concern of modern life. Morality ceases to occupy any elevated position. Take, for instance, the Gore campaign's response to the "unfairness" of Bush's criticisms regarding Al Gore's history of deception: "We've never attacked Bush for his numerous crimes against the English language." So, as this statement reveals, faulty syntax is on a par with serial lying. How tolerant the social

attitudes toward leadership lies have become, in stark contrast with the presidential campaign of 1988, when revelations of plagiarism forced Joseph Biden out of the race.

Alexis de Tocqueville once asked how a democracy could survive if, as political ties are relaxed, moral ties are not strengthened. As he put it, what could be done with a people that is master of itself if it is not subject to God? And in his recent book, *The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Egalitarianism*, Nobel laureate Robert William Fogel argues that modern society has made great progress in every area save one—the promotion of moral behavior. According to Fogel, in a society prone to teenage pregnancy, drug addiction, and crime, “immaterial goods” (or moral values) are more important than mere cash in lifting up the poor. But of course this is difficult to do, since such values are usually transferred through intimate relationships rather than government handouts.

Conclusion

A sense of glee seems to prevail over America's seeming “triumph” over ideology. It's as if, enjoying its most peaceful and prosperous time in history, America has finally wised up. Technology is the key, not ideology. Technology can bring progress without pain, just as it brought economic growth without inflation. So now that our wars are finished and our recessions banished, why should we continue to endure those ideological battles that characterized our past? Safe at last, why not enjoy ourselves?

This message of ideological irrelevance was sent through Bill Clinton's third-way presidency, his triangulation between conservatism and liberalism. But like many aspects of his presidency, Clinton's “third way” was a deception (as was his statement that the era of big government was over): it wasn't a transcendence beyond ideology, but a covert campaign against it. It wasn't just a dead centrism derived from opinion polls, but a strategy aimed at undermining public support for conservative values. (Unrestrained sexual activity became a right, but uninhibited religious expression became intolerance; diversity became a holy creed, while civic virtue became a cast-away relic; and the military became more of a laboratory of lifestyle experimentation than an institution of national defense.)

Like the Minutemen against the British, opponents of conservatism have refrained from waging a head-on ideological attack, leaving conservatives to appear as the only ideologues. They have cloaked their policy initiatives in the superficially neutral term child welfare. To an electorate with a short attention span and a reluctance to make ideological judgments, however, this definition more or less ends any debate on the issue—either you're for children, or you're against them.

Liberals have also been able to do an end run around ideology by adopting their political agenda to the language of the market. They have created a consumer politics that seems to transcend political ideologies, just as the market economy transcends national borders and racial identities. Voters are

treated like consumers, under the theory that they will keep patronizing the public sector mall as long as there's some little shop geared just for them. It's an approach that made the Clinton health care plan (with its secretive preparations leading up to the big unveiling) resemble the way a department store closes early before a big sale so as to get everything ready for the waiting shoppers. But as conservative ideology has always held, a democracy requires that voters have duties as citizens that they don't have as consumers. While the market seeks to satisfy, politics aims to uplift.

The self-absorption of a consumer-oriented politics was on full display during the 2000 presidential campaign. Dominating that campaign was the ever-finicky "undecided voter," who was treated like a consumer strolling through the supermarket, constantly debating which brand to buy. It was these "voters"—those who seemed to care more about their own shopping lists than about the interest of the nation—who became the defining voice of presidential politics. And this voice was captured so succinctly in the third debate by a woman who asked not about foreign policy or Supreme Court justices or the role of government, but about how the candidates' plans would translate into her own specific tax return.

History has shown that the world needs ideology. It needs both conservatism (to retain the best of the past) and liberalism (to voice concerns that might not have been articulated in the past). Yet society is becoming more

ideologically homogenous at the same time that it is becoming more demographically diverse. We may all look different, but we're tending to think alike—like consumers, all after the same bargains. This intellectual shallowness, however, runs counter to the conservative maxim that ideas have consequences.

Perhaps the demanding nature of conservative values makes them unpopular in the egocentric mood of the times. How odd it is, though, that we so desperately celebrate the heroism of the past, through such books as Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation*, just when we most lack the strength and vision of such heroism.

But then, conservative values have always done well in crises. Their triumph over communism, for instance, was something an egocentric ethos could never have done. With the erosion of these values, however, America's defeat of communism may prove to be empty. It may prove to mark the beginning of, as Francis Fukuyama notes in *The End of History and the Last Man*, "the banalization of life through modern consumerism" and the replacement of a worldview with just a narcissistic egocentrism. It may prove to be the point at which America, left without higher ideals, slips into the depravity of materialistic temptations. Because, as David Brooks writes in *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There*, the spiritual life of our egocentric culture is so "tepid and undemanding" that under its reign we may well "become a nation that enjoys the comforts of private life but has lost any

sense of national union and any sense of a unique historical mission.”

An absence of conservative values has left America ideologically adrift in the new consumer culture. Taxes are seen not as a crucial factor in the relationship between governmental power and individual freedom, but as a harmless payment for contentment. In all the new government programs proposed by Bill Clinton and Al Gore and embraced by the consuming public, Americans are allowing government to increasingly regulate them. (Indeed, big government is ultimately a necessity in an age of the self: people won't put their own lives on hold to take care of sick relatives.) So like a frog that sits calmly in a pot while the water gets hotter, Americans (without the power of ideology) are passively watching their freedoms erode. They are quietly allowing their leaders to lie and to manipulate them in ways that once would have seemed inconceivable.

As Arthur Schlesinger Jr. observed in *The Cycles of American History*, periods of liberalism have alternated with periods of conservatism. And perhaps the present is not in one of those cycles of conservatism. In the current emotional climate, it seems as though conservatism is on the defensive—helpless to deflect those poll-tested labels like “mean-spirited” and “reckless.”

No matter how the 2000 election has turned out, the cultural drift away from conservatism will not automatically change. (Indeed, throughout the campaign season, conservative positions on abortion and taxes were constantly on the defensive, yet the

excesses of teacher unions and trial lawyers received barely a mention.) What is needed is a conservative countercultural movement that gradually takes root in the mainstream culture. Fortunately, American history is full of countercultural movements; and perhaps conservatism at the beginning of the twenty-first century occupies a position similar to that of liberalism in the 1950s. (And, coincidentally, American society in the year 2000 was far more consumer-oriented and conformist, along politically correct guidelines, than it ever was in the 1950s.)

The primary focus of conservative activism, therefore, may have to be cultural rather than political. (It might even be a mistake to try to achieve politically what would not be supported culturally.) Social institutions that promote conservative values will have to be rejuvenated, and the conservative message will have to find expression in the mainstream media. (Indeed, fresh-thinking conservative commentators are providing the only real social criticism in America today.)

For conservative values to prevail in the future, conservatives will have to achieve greater unity than they have in the past. Religious conservatives will have to cross denominational lines and unite according to the values they share. If a synagogue or a mosque is threatened in any way, conservative Christians should be the first to give aid, not the ACLU.

The values of immigrant groups will have to be studied for points of compatibility with the American conservative tradition. And it is the conservative

who should take the lead in helping immigrants (the inheritors of the real American dream) find work, practice their faith, and build a life free of government interference.

Double standards that exist within the conservative ranks should also be eliminated. A strong stand against abortion, for instance, is philosophically incompatible with support of the death penalty. Conservatives should work at building a pro-life mentality, not just an end to abortion.

Conservatives must also transcend the strictures of identity politics; they must strive to solve, with conservative policies, the problems of ethnic and racial groups who traditionally have only looked for liberal-sponsored solutions. And the often-condemning nature of conservative attitudes toward gays needs to be reconsidered. Nowhere in the American conservative tradition, from Washington to Lincoln, is there any indication that sexual preference should enter the political arena. Political values in a democracy should center on civic duty and public conduct, not on the intimate behavior in one's own home. Indeed, the conservative focus should not be on sexual preference, but on how self-indulgence and the lack of

individual restraint corrodes the political and cultural life of the nation. And given the example set by our former heterosexual-in-chief, sexual preference obviously has little to do with the practice of civic virtue.

Conservatism is more than just a brake on liberalism, although since the New Deal that is often how it has acted. Conservative values can and should be affirmatively applied to social problems. No one, despite a plethora of government programs, can succeed or prosper without self-reliance, self-discipline, and self-sacrifice. Society cannot remain healthy in the midst of rampant flouting of authority and defiant individualism. Nor can a nation thrive without social unity. As America becomes increasingly fractionalized, it needs ever more the unifying ideology that conservatism provides. But conservatives will continually have to explore ways to extend their values into a rapidly changing world. They will also have to be ever vigilant toward new threats. In America today, perhaps that means taking strong steps to prevent the selfish, mindless materialism of the age from corrupting conservative values. n