

# Liberalism Means Try, Try Again

L.A. TIMES, NOVEMBER 1, 1988

## The Day Is Short and the Work Is Urgent, So Let's Get On About the Nation's Problems

By HENRY A. WAXMAN

Since George Bush has based his entire campaign on a fierce attack on liberalism, one of us liberals needs to set the record straight.

Despite all the nasty and misleading rhetoric, the liberal view of government is surprisingly modest. Liberals believe that, in addition to providing for our national defense, the federal government has an appropriate role in crafting effective solutions to our nation's domestic problems. Most Americans agree.

This approach is fundamentally different from Reaganism, which holds that protecting our national security is virtually the only legitimate function of the federal government. Under Reaganism, the government has no business interfering in social inequities or abuses. Reaganism argues that the free market will eventually right all wrongs. No problem is so big that it cannot be ignored.

Reaganism adores moral exhortations—its main weapon in the war against drugs is its “just say no” campaign—and loathes addressing the social, economic and cultural roots of problems.

But not everyone listens, and some problems are a bit more complicated than lack of self-discipline. That's one reason we need a strong and active government—to develop sensible responses to health, education and economic problems.

Government is also needed to enact regulations that smooth the rough edges off capitalism. The private sector is one of our nation's greatest strengths, but the free market isn't a perfect mechanism. It doesn't respond well to environmental concerns, abuses from a concentration of power or frauds foisted on consumers. These are significant cracks in our system that pose serious dangers to millions of Americans.

On this point Reaganism adopts a Darwinian view. For instance, the logic for dismantling consumer agencies is that they are unnecessary, since defective products will lead to injury or death, which then bring lawsuits and economic consequences, which then force the products off the market. This is silly and reckless. A better, more civilized system is to enact regulations that provide basic protections and prevent injuries where possible.

Reaganism is static. It takes things as they are and seeks no change. Its measure of success is materialism, nothing more.

Liberalism is dynamic. It searches for a better society

and is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, not just those with power and wealth. Our standard isn't how much money a few acquire, but how much opportunity is open to all Americans.

Last year Alex Kotlowitz of the Wall Street Journal wrote a harrowing article about Chicago's Henry Horner housing project. He described a neighborhood ruled by gangs and filled with poverty, fear and drugs. Only the most violent survive, and even they for not very long. It's a neighborhood out of control and without hope.

Reaganism has no energy or ideas for America's Henry Horner projects. There is no compassion, no understanding. Reaganism ignores the unpleasantness of urban poverty; it looks past it to an idealized America that is happy and tidy.

Liberals understand that the projects are not only a human tragedy but also a lost resource for our nation. Ignoring this waste is wrong. It is also dangerous. These projects are breeding grounds for drugs and crime, teenage pregnancies and abortions. Singing “Don't Worry, Be Happy” and urging kids to “just say no” won't work here—the solution is government leadership and involvement. We must hire more police to take back control of our streets and issue tough mandatory prison sentences to the worst criminals. And if housing projects and other existing programs are failing, we need to eliminate them, redouble our efforts and create innovative alternatives. But we must try, and try again.

As new problems emerge—the devastating costs of long-term health care for older Americans, the AIDS epidemic, the scandal of 37 million Americans without health insurance, or global warming and ozone depletion—liberals are best able to devise coordinated and thoughtful governmental responses.

The Reagan-Bush record on all these issues is appalling. It took more than six years just to convince President Reagan to say “AIDS” in public. And the Administration has never missed an opportunity to oppose additional pollution-control measures. Reaganism wants to hide from these problems. Liberals want to lead on these issues, knowing that private initiative—no matter how well intentioned—can never provide an adequate answer to such problems.

Because we care about social needs, liberals are criticized as “big spenders.” The fact is that many spending programs can pay dividends for years to come. Investments in preventive programs, like sex education and prenatal care, actually save taxpayers' money and improve the lives of millions of Americans.

Just as important, it is not the liberals who are responsible for the Reagan budget deficits. The disastrous

combination of huge tax cuts for the wealthy and wasteful increases in defense spending—what Bush once called “voodoo economics”—has more than doubled our national debt and leaves it to our children and grandchildren to pay our bills.

The only way to put our financial house in order is to evaluate coldly every program, both defense and non-defense, and decide if we are getting our money's worth. And we simply need more revenue to pay our bills; our challenge is crafting prudent tax increases that don't adversely affect our economy.

We liberals are also often accused of being concerned exclusively about people at the bottom of our society—the homeless, the unemployed, the minorities and the poor. But we are also concerned about the vast middle class whose affluence is often more apparent than real. Many families can barely hold on to a middle-class life style with two incomes. Even the comfortable upper middle class is finding it impossible to finance college education for its children.

We must never take for granted—or be willing to sacrifice for short-term political gain—our freedoms of speech, press and religion. Patriotism is measured not by how often we say the Pledge of Allegiance but by how strongly we fight to protect and preserve our constitutional rights, even for the most unpopular among us. Our freedoms are our greatest strength—that which sets us apart from every other nation.

America remains the greatest nation on Earth. Yet we should take notice that we are the only industrialized society without a nationalized health-insurance program. More than a dozen nations boast of better schools and higher achievement for their students. A score of nations can point to infant-mortality rates well below ours. And we sadly have one of the worst rates for children living in poverty.

Those who care about our nation's future will face these truths. Lying to the voters now may win elections, but only at an unacceptable price to our children.

Liberals reject this. Our energetic, restless, problem-solving philosophy may best be summed up in the time-honored dictum: “The day is short, the work is urgent. It is not your duty to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.”

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