

DIVERGENT PHILOSOPHICAL DOCTRINES OF HUMAN NATURE
AND THE
WELLSPRING OF REPUBLICAN AND DEMOCRATIC PARTY
POLITICAL DIFFERENCES

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It is said that conflicts of economic interests dominate the short run in societies but conflicts of vision dominate history. Issues as diverse as criminal justice, income distribution, social justice and war and peace consistently show one vision lining up on one side and those of another vision lining up on the other side. A question that has struck me for many years is why have schools of philosophy about the nature of man become so sharply divergent, especially since the 1600s. And why are the major political parties so radically different in their worldviews about the nature of social process – so much so that they create acrimonious debate, negative advertising, and strong personal emotions about each other? Obviously there are widely differing premises about our sense of how the world works, about human nature and about causation, and I plan to examine these.

As a matter of political reality, this conflict of visions is also reflected in the difference of how Republican Party members and Democratic Party members think and act. People seeking public office not only usually declare themselves either as a Republican or Democrat, but also in terms of philosophy as a modern-day conservative or a modern-day liberal. However, this is often purposively obscured by attempts at various in-between states such as “moderate” or “economic

conservative – social liberal” to name just two. These mid-point philosophical members, however, are in small proportions. There now appears to be a new paradox on the block just in time for the 2000 presidential election. It is called “compassionate conservatism”, largely espoused by Presidential candidate-to-be Governor George W. Bush of Texas, and it claims to represent a break with the national Republican programs of the past. It also claims to be a well-formed domestic policy agenda, which remains to be seen. Bush’s detractors are already dismissing their new vision as empty and “a slur on past Republican’s accomplishments.” A second purpose of this paper, then, will be to examine this philosophy (or oxymoron, as the case may be) of “compassionate conservatism”, and ask why have so many people either embraced it or rejected it.

The national divide underneath the polar-opposite labels of Republican-Democrat and liberal-conservative is of a scope that many believe has not been seen since the Civil War. Some thinkers say this conflict of political visions is more serious than ever and is a legitimate concern for our country’s future. In fact, the impeachment trial of the president reflected to many people this serious situation. Scanning the “Viewpoints” section of the Houston Chronicle on one typical day, March 5th, I found two letters to the editor that exemplified this radical tone of differing views of the human condition in the world of politics.

The first one deeply criticized the “rich” GOP 10% tax cut as “outrageous” in that this rebate money comes from the social security side of the surplus. The writer goes on to say “we know the Republican congressmen to be Puritans, now let’s add that they are also thieves.... I doubt that the rebate would be a year’s supply of caviar – let the Republicans eat tuna fish, instead.”

The second letter to the editor on the same day criticized the lack of a moral standard in America by saying, “for those of us who believe Clinton’s salacious behavior deserved his removal from office, how many injustices do we have to endure? ...With the emergence of Broadrick and another serious criminal act by the president, this only serves to fuel the shameful decline of our cultural and moral values.”

I think one would have to agree that these two letters demonstrate the conflict of agendas (or visions) that are present in today’s political arena. So much for the near term prospects for bi-partisanship, consensus-building and “competitive cooperation” unless a mid-position such as compassionate conservatism can be rationally constructed.

Much of this deep divide in political visions goes back to one’s view of the nature of man. Thus, competitive theories of human nature lie at the base or outset of these political struggles for power and different views lead naturally to different conclusions about *what* we ought to do, philosophically, and *how* we can do it, politically. Furthermore, conflicting beliefs of human potential and the purpose of life are

embodied in different ways in all political and economic systems as well as educational theory.

The oldest or most emotional debate about rival theories of human nature usually involve the radically different visions espoused by Christianity and Marxism. Each differ in their conception of the universe and in the essential nature of the individual so much that it is both an emotional, i.e., deadly, and intellectual conflict of the first order. In brief, Christianity believes each man is free to accept or reject God's purpose and will be judged to how he exercises this freedom or, in effect, "free will." Marxism, on the other hand, denies God and moral freedom by asserting that our ideas and attitudes are determined by the kind of society we live in or, in effect, "social determinism," and that there is possible a perfect society in which men can become their "real selves".

Today, we discuss and define these competing views as capitalism as the polar opposite of the European socialist model. Both are ideologies at conflict. They are more than theories of human nature as each suggest a differing course of action. An ideology, whether recast as modern liberalism or as classical liberalism (i.e. conservatism) is a system of beliefs not only about the nature of man but also must be held by a group of people and reflects a "way of life". As in the current political struggle today, each ideology usually is a passionately held one, with few prisoners taken, unless a mid-position is achieved. An ideology not only presupposes a theory of human nature but also usually has a diagnosis

of what is wrong with man, has a prescription for putting it right, and has self-defensive ways of explaining away intellectual difficulties and criticisms. Is there any wonder that liberals and conservatives today hold battle until the last soldier is left standing, or that intermarriages become nearly impossible?

Let's look at the stakes that this struggle usually plays for in this "conflict of visions" (Thomas Sowell, *Conflict of Visions*). The socialist side, i.e. modern-day liberalism, generally seeks to replace the rule of law with the search for social justice, individual rights with group rights; the guarantee of property with the redistribution of property through entitlements and our common "American" identity with multi-culturalism. Clearly theirs is a different compass and clearly in today's marketplace the Democratic Party is currently driven by this classic socialist doctrine of social determinism. They also claim to see the shortcomings of the past as the relevant history of this land and more or less believe the principles that have guided it to date must be slowly replaced, i.e., anti-status quo. These are indeed high stakes! They reflect the intensity of debate between today's followers of Newt Gingrich and Barney Frank in the halls of the U.S. Congress.

The conservative "free will" school of philosophy has a different compass altogether, with bearings on the rule of law, not man; individual rights and the ("joined at the hip") guarantee of private property and, of course, with a common or traditional value identity of "exceptional note."

The ingredients of this identity (and continually attacked by the Democratic left) are history, language, family, morality, work ethic, self-government and national defense. In 1999, and in the foreseeable future, it is the Republican Party that is today's sole vehicle to represent the conservative philosophy political side of this battle and to represent the "free will" school and of their concept of human nature.

To quickly summarize this basic disagreement of philosophy and ideology, liberal philosophy in practice has largely come down to questions of group rights, regulations, entitlements and procedure. To the modern-day conservative, i.e. classical liberal, the distinctiveness of their philosophy has come down to concrete expressions of the maximization of individual freedom, limited government, individual rights, the family and equality under the law. Each philosophy is equally suspicious of the other and there is a growing societal discrepancy that we can no longer ignore as only academic or theoretic. Additionally, each views the other as "politically corrupt". This would seem to dissolve any quick future consensus or any chance of "competitive cooperation" by Republicans and Democrats on such issues as military spending, poverty, crime and budget allocations. Can "compassionate conservatism" bridge this deep divide? That is the central question for the 2000 presidential debate and subsequent election, or perhaps even the question for the entire next generation of voters to answer.

Now that we have examined some of the 1) radically different premises of human nature that undergird the liberal and conservative political struggle, 2) that are the divergent foundations of the “free will” school of philosophy and the “determinism” school of philosophy, and 3) why Republican and Democrat true believers are so rare in consensus, we must now look at some of the political or philosophical hurdles that “compassionate conservatism” must overcome so it can avoid dismissal as devoid of any true intellectual content. All the while, we must not disconnect from these different premises which provide the consistency behind the repeated opposition of individuals, political parties and other groups on so many issues. In a word, they have different visions on how the world works and will always, at least until the very end of any debate, line up on opposite sides.

Paraphrasing from Thomas Sowell’s book on the ideological origins of political struggles, let’s examine some of the deep psychological premises as they relate to “world views” of causation. If *causation* proceeds as our *vision* conceives it to be, then certain consequences will follow. A “theory”, such as that of human nature, is the working out of what those consequences are. Facts, in this case, speak for or against competing theories. Visions, then, set the agenda for both thought and action. And, from a broad perspective of history, intellectuals, political parties or other organizations can be viewed as simply “carriers” of these divergent rationally articulated ideas.

From the modern day conservative side, one must begin with Adam Smith who felt that a theory of human nature must be as “realistic” as possible. He theorized that instead of trying to change man’s nature, we should attempt to find how the moral and social benefits devised by society could be produced in the most efficient way; that is, *within an acknowledged “constraint”*. That constraint is that there are moral limitations to man, his egocentricity in particular, and that this must be treated as an inherent fact of life. The fundamental moral and social challenge was to make the best of life within that constraint. Smith went on to later say that economic benefits to society were largely unintended by individuals, but emerged systemically from the interactions of the free marketplace, under the rules of competition and incentives for personal gain. In other words, let’s take human self-interest as a given and construct a society where “trade-offs” provide the best overall solutions for a “self-adjusting order” in life.

A second “constraint” in the conservative vision is that any individual’s own knowledge alone is grossly inadequate for social decision-making. Thus arises the penchant for conservatives to denounce “elitism” in liberal politics today. In a word, in a complex society, there has to be a tremendous range of experience, “winnowing out in Darwinian competition what works from what does not work.” The “trade-off” perspective of the constrained or “realistic” vision of human

nature treats societal defects as inevitable and therefore not in themselves reason for change, and allows the Democrats to attack the Republicans as “mean-spirited” and “extreme.” Regardless of who wins or loses, a society is fair if it has rules of operation that are agreed upon and proper. The *Federalist Papers* is this view’s “bible” and the U.S. Constitution is its license to do business.

Let’s now look at the opposing vision of human nature, which sees man as needing an “unconstrained” self-image. First of all, this is an “idealistic” view that there is yet untapped moral potential of human beings and that society can change human nature. Their view is unequivocally and diametrically opposed to the conservative (classical) view of mankind. Man, as they view things, is “perfectible” in that he is continually improveable and you should not proscribe any human limitations of understanding. Thus, there should be no reason why social ills and evils cannot be solved with sufficient moral commitment. This is the derivation of the term “bleeding heart liberal” in today’s Republican lexicon describing a Democrat’s compassion. Furthermore, liberals today see the fundamental problem as not human beings but rather man’s *institutions* and that goals (or party agendas) must be viewed in terms of desired results with no unhappy side effects. In other words, no trade-offs.

It is remarkable how consistent these two visions are unto themselves and how deeply committed each side is. How human nature

is conceived, i.e. your “world view” of mankind at the outset, is highly correlated with your whole conception of knowledge, morality, power, freedom and law. These are two sharply divergent and diametrically conflicting traditions that theorize about human nature. It would appear that the “twain shall never meet”. Also, the view that makes you a “carrier” for either vision usually is acquired or learned at an early age, i.e. socialization of values, and your subsequent party membership is simply an outgrowth of your perception of human nature and your “vision” of how the world really does or should work.

Let’s now examine how these differing “fundamental beliefs” or world views are embodied in political party platforms which, in turn, attempt to set a course of human action when empowered. The 1996 Texas GOP platform preamble provides some direct, if not exaggerated evidence:

- “Slavery, segregation and genocide are made possible only by the expanding power of government.”
- “The more that paid government intervenes in personal relationships, the more those relationships will be diminished, not strengthened.”
- “To those who seek security in strong government, (they) will sell their future on the altar of government and false promises: guaranteed education, guaranteed jobs, guaranteed security. No government in history has ever kept these guarantees... not in our

governments but in ourselves is the source of all that is great and good.”

- “We believe in excellence and prefer the opportunity of high achievement to the guarantee of a meaningless mediocrity.”

To demonstrate their commitment to the GOP Texas platform’s “way of life,” three planks in particular seem to reflect their “take no prisoners” agenda: “We deplore the hypocrisy of Republican candidates who support Democrats”, The Party then directs that there be “no financial support or political assistance to such candidates”. In terms of judicial review, another plank “requires judges interpret and apply rather than make law.... We urge the Governor and legislature to remove all judges who refuse to adhere to this philosophy.” Lastly, on criminal justice, the party supports the goals of the prison system as protection of society first, punishment second and rehabilitation last. A modern-day liberal Democrat would choose exile before he would embrace the above vision of mankind.

The national Republican Party also has made it clear that there are extreme differences in political philosophy. One such pamphlet issued by the National Federation of Republican Women (one that I’m sure Elizabeth Dole would have to be in agreement on) delivers the following attack on the Democrat’s European socialist profile today: “Democrats promote an economic order dependent upon and controlled by Federal

government planning and regulation. They embrace... a powerful central government taking our tax money to spend on our behalf, and regulating much of our lives.... The Democrats believe that government, given enough money, can solve everything.”

Additionally, a 1998 one-page handout by the Texas GOP drew several key distinctions between the “values” of the Texas political culture (“Which Texas Party supports your values?”):

- “The Texas Republican Party believes that the traditional family and the values it fosters are the foundation of American society; the Texas Democratic Party believes that American society must redefine its values to fit new lifestyle concepts which have resulted from the 60s counter-culture movement.”
- “The Texas Republican Party believes that with freedom comes responsibility and that individuals must take personal responsibility for their own actions. The Texas Democratic Party believes that individual behavior, including criminal behavior, can be blamed on society and that spending on social welfare can combat crime.”
- “The Texas Republican Party believes it is imperative today to reaffirm the traditional freedoms of values. The Texas Democratic Party believes that Americans must adopt multicultural sets of values, which deny a common American heritage and will divide American society (into group rights rather than individual rights).”

It is obvious from the above multidimensional assessment of the sharply divergent visions of each political party that it would seem absurd to imagine “bi-partisanship” in our future for this country. The basic disagreement comes down to the central notion that the Republican national party vision is firmly based upon the acceptance of the concept and *restraint* of powers with only limited, delegated powers to the central government, so as to produce a “free society”, while the national Democratic party favors the *expansion* of the “general welfare” clause in the Constitution and in the domination of the Executive Branch of government so as to produce a “results-oriented” society. And this radical difference has now been in an “in your face” competition for at least 200 years and not likely to disappear. Again, how is presidential candidate George W. Bush’s attempt at “compassionate conservatism” going to sell intellectually in next year’s national campaign against this deep divide? Could he become a genius or could he be seen as only a cosmetic figure in American politics?

Not to digress, but it should be noted that George W. Bush is a large-state governor, sort of like a “mayor” of an enormous city, where results, innovations and reinventing are significant goals. The people, if not the intellectuals, have always supported the notion that the “states” are the laboratories of democracy or the proving grounds for national recasting. The 1996 Welfare Reform Act originating in Wisconsin and

Michigan as a new way of thinking about the poor is a case in point today. It should also be noted that George W. Bush's father was offered the party's nomination for governor several times during his career and turned them all down to run or be appointed to central government positions. This fact, along with the cultural conservative attachment to Texas of son George while his father was and is always to New England may provide George W. the "bridge" in which to fashion some viable mid-position political vision. Personal backgrounds do matter in an individual's world view development, and George W. will have to indeed break out of the traditional "rich" Republican mold without offending his base constituency. Perhaps the Republican governors of Wisconsin and Michigan have already pointed the way.

If the George Bush campaign for the American presidency could do the unexpected by garnering political support from moderates without losing his conservative base vote, he could very well capture the imagination of the general public and usher in a true realignment of the two political parties. Theodore Roosevelt, as the Republican president from the New Industrial Age pro-business party, did it by becoming anti-monopolistic and pro conservationist of land resources. Richard Nixon, as president of the Cold War pro-defense party, did it by re-directing American foreign policy to cultural linkage with "Red" China and later negotiated arms control with the former Soviet Empire. Both Roosevelt and Nixon's new policies brought great success politically to the national

Republican Party as they each dominated the ensuing generations, e.g., the Republicans won five out of six presidential elections between 1968 and 1992.

As a point of reference, the national Democratic Party has “branded” the Republican Party as the “party of the rich” in this current generation and created a class struggle reminiscent of Marxist intellectual debates of yesteryear. The Republicans, also by reference, attacked the Democrats during the previous 1980 decade as the party of not only international pacifism but also as socially degenerate, i.e., supporting gay and lesbian rights, single-parent households, etc. The 1990 decade has seen every tax reduction plan or economic reform as “only benefiting the rich” and the GOP, as framed by the Democratic leadership, as the agents of the upper class. As the national defense and counter-cultural issues have gradually declined in salience, the Republicans have been open to attack on class/economic grounds and this largely was responsible for the Clinton electoral successes. How imaginative it would be for Republican George W. Bush to be able to take the “underclass” issue and turn it around on the Democrats in 2000.

According to a Wall Street Journal op-ed article on February 5, 1999, Bush’s “compassionate conservatism” intends to do just that since concern for the poor has not been a traditional Republican preoccupation. In fact, the political lexicon of this generation created the term “benign neglect” just for Republicans and the poor to be able to

communicate. After all, it might be said Republicans are and have been only interested through history in macro-economic, but macro-social, issues. The Democrats, it would seem from the welfare reform debates of 1995-96, have left themselves open to GOP counter attacks on the issue of “the poor.”

Most recently this Hegelian “synthesis” has come from the governors (the GOP holds 31 state houses today and 8 of the 10 largest states) in the Republican Party since they, not the national Republicans have made solving the problems of the urban underclass a top priority. The liberal “thesis” states that the only way, for example, to reduce crime against society was to cure “its root causes,” i.e. racism, passive victims of unseen economic forces, etc. The heretofore conservative “anti-thesis” was to extend welfare programs even though considering them useless. The situation was well described in the Journal article: “Liberal compassion’s main success is to make the self-styled compassionate liberal feel good about their superior virtue. Compassionate conservatism derails the Democratic Party’s greatest rhetorical advantage, its demonstrably empty claim of a monopoly on caring about the worst off.” Furthermore, the poor need to know, according to this analysis, that “they can’t blame the system for their wrongdoing... and need to hear the message of personal responsibility and self-reliance.”

The Bush synthesis, then, is really a composite of various innovative programs tested and re-tested at the state level by recently

elected Republican governors, particularly those from Wisconsin, Michigan and yes, from Texas and New York. The compassionate conservative policy for the problems of the underclass is one of “workfare” to be sure, but also 1) re-stigmatizing illegitimacy, 2) Privatized residential hostels for welfare mothers and their children, run by church-related groups, 3) safe neighborhoods with activist enforcement policies, 4) higher standards for teachers in inner-city schools in addition to publicly funded voucher systems providing “outside competition” and 5) “admitting immigrants whose energy and enterprise can revitalize inner cities with optimistic messages.”

The bottom line to these Republican programs is that it forces the Democrats to defend a welfare system that has been acknowledged, even by Clinton, as socially bankrupt and forcing innovative GOP solutions to center stage in national politics. And that in itself could change the face of American politics for the next generation.

Ideological divide may delay reform of Social Security

Partisan visions of government collide

WASHINGTON — When the Clinton administration put shoring up Social Security at the top of the national agenda last year, White House officials said the first order of business was to make it politically safe to have a frank debate about the options.

Fourteen months later, the two parties have an array of choices before them, and from the White House to the Capitol to the scores of research and lobbying groups with an interest in the issue, the pros and cons of all of them are being examined in detail.

But while it has proved safe to talk about Social Security, the chances of talk turning to action remain questionable. Moreover, the positions staked out by the most influential forces in the debate reflect fundamentally differing visions of the role of government.

The extreme difficulty of reconciling the faith among Democrats in the government and the push by Republicans for a more market-based solution to social welfare problems was on full display earlier this month when a bipartisan commission on Medicare collapsed amid bitter disagreements.

Most Democrats, especially those liberals who view Social Security as Exhibit A in their argument that government has a crucial role to play in ensuring the well-being of citizens, are determined to maintain the system as much as possible in its current form.

They have rallied around the outline of a plan offered by President Clinton in his State of the Union address. Clinton called for keeping intact the current system, with its guaranteed retirement benefit. He proposed using a big chunk of expected federal budget surpluses, in a somewhat circuitous way, to extend Social Security's solvency for about 17 years, to 2049.

The president also proposed allowing the federal government for the first time to invest a portion of Social Security's reserves in stocks and bonds, a step he said would extend the system's solvency to 2055. To meet the system's historical goal of 75 years of solvency, Clinton said, the two parties would have to agree on other unspecified steps, like raising taxes.

Clinton also proposed an important change outside the Social Security system. To promote retirement savings, he wants to establish a new form of private investment account, mainly for low- to middle-income workers.

Most Republicans are coming at the problem from a completely different perspective. They say the system

needs a total overhaul, both to bring its financial condition into line with the pressures it will face and to give individuals additional flexibility to amass wealth.

Republicans considering a number of variants are working on legislation they hope to introduce in coming months. But their basic approach is to establish personal investment accounts within Social Security through which individuals could invest in stocks and bonds.

Although such individual accounts would carry with them the risk of loss should Wall Street suffer a sharp or protracted downturn, most of the Republican plans contemplate some kind of guarantee that no retiree would emerge worse off than under the current system.

The details of both the Democratic and the Republican approaches are complicated and confusing, even to economists and policy analysts. The arguments surrounding them touch on finance, demographics and human behavior.

But the battle ultimately is being fought over ideology, not mathematical computer models.

"There is a very deep ideological divide, and it's going to be very difficult to bridge," said Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., who favors keeping the current system intact.

"Republicans by and large want to privatize Social Security and believe in a system of personal accounts," Nadler said. "The Democrats by and large believe that would destroy Social Security."

The optimistic view, which tends to be held more among Republicans than Democrats, starts with a belief that there is considerable common ground between the two sides.

The optimists say that both Clinton and the Republicans endorse seeking higher returns for Social Security in the stock market and that they differ only over whether individuals or the government should do the investing.

They say Clinton and Republicans agree on the desirability of private investment accounts, and disagree only over whether the accounts should be established within Social Security or outside it.

And they say both parties have an interest in dealing with the problem now, since every passing year will make the proposed fixes more painful for recipients and taxpayers.

But there are fewer and fewer optimists on either side these days.

"The different approaches really are irreconcilable," said Mark Weisbrot, research director of the Preamble Center, a liberal research group.