

The Trouble with Liberals and Conservatives

by David Boaz

The country is polarized, we're told. Bush-haters versus Clinton-haters. Mel Gibson versus Michael Moore. Red states versus blue states. Liberals and conservatives read different books, watch different networks, go to different churches.

But liberals and conservatives have more in common than you might think.

Both believe in government magic. And they want you to believe in it too. They want you to believe the president can be Superman, Santa Claus and Mother Teresa all rolled into one and that he can cure poverty and racism, keep kids off drugs and keep families together. Magical thinking is cute among children. But adults should know that the world is complicated and that legislative actions often fail, or backfire, or have unintended consequences or disappear into bureaucratic sinkholes.

Both ignore history. Liberals look at the 20th century's grand experiment of capitalism versus socialism—the United States versus the Soviet Union, Western Europe versus Eastern Europe, China versus Hong Kong—and somehow conclude that what the U.S. needs today is more socialism. National health insurance, a more centralized educational system, government regulation for our most dynamic industries—in every case ignoring the historical triumph of compe-

*David Boaz is executive vice president of the Cato Institute and author of *Libertarianism: A Primer* (Free Press, 1997).*

tion and freedom. Conservatives think government can restore the world of the 1950s, ignoring the most basic lesson of history: Things change.

Both respond to special interests. Look at the Bush administration: an energy bill designed by energy companies, a steel tariff on imports for the steel industry, a Medicare drug entitlement that will shift costs from big business to the taxpayers, the proposed Federal Marriage Amendment for religious-right supporters. Meanwhile, liberal administrations never forget the trial lawyers, the feminists, the civil rights lawyers and the other groups that help them gain power.

Both involve the nation in unnecessary wars. Conservatives think the U.S. should send troops anywhere our vital interests are threatened, and they have a very expansive definition of our "vital interests." Liberals take a different tack: They like to send troops anywhere our interests are not threatened—it seems less greedy and Republican. That's why liberals get excited about sending U.S. troops to Somalia, Liberia and Bosnia.

Both will forgive anything a member of their team does. Remember when conservatives thought President Clinton's alliance with Monica Lewinsky was a national scandal, and liberals thought conservatives were a bunch of prudes? Then Arnold Schwarzenegger was accused of groping women, and suddenly the liberals wanted to hang him and the conservatives said Democrats should lighten up.

Conservatives sued to make Hillary Rodham Clinton report who was on her health-care task force; liberals sued to make Dick

Cheney tell us who was on his energy task force.

The red team/blue team mentality applies even to trivia: Liberals are shocked that Cheney said a bad word to a senator, but uber-liberal Hillary Clinton said, "You go, girl!" when Teresa Heinz Kerry told a reporter to "shove it!" Conservatives, outraged about Heinz Kerry's rudeness, had defended Cheney's vulgarity on the Senate floor.

And the No. 1 way liberals and conservatives are alike: Both think they can run your life better than you can.

Liberals want to raise taxes because they can spend your money better than you can. They don't believe in school choice because you're not capable of choosing a school for your children. They think they can handle your healthcare, your retirement and your charitable contributions better than you can.

Conservatives want to censor cable television because you're too dumb to decide what your family should watch. They want to ban drugs, pornography, gambling and gay marriage because you just don't know what's good for you.

The reality is, Americans aren't as polarized as the pundits say. Most want government out of their pocketbooks and personal lives. They want civil liberties and lower taxes. And they feel free to reject both liberals and conservatives when their ideas don't make sense.

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