



BY PETER GOETTLER

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## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

# A Time for Choosing?

It was his 1964 speech “A Time for Choosing” in support of Barry Goldwater’s presidential candidacy that is said to have launched Ronald Reagan’s political career.

Many remember the speech as focused on the Cold War and the confrontation between the United States and Soviet communism, probably because this theme dominated the end of the address. But most of Reagan’s message concerned the growth of the state here at home: burgeoning federal spending, government programs with perverse unintended consequences, and the hand of government reaching into more and more aspects of our lives and private endeavors.

I normally recoil from assertions that any particular time in our lives is a turning point of history. We repeatedly exaggerate the importance of the here and now, and the true turning points are often evident only with the benefit of hindsight. After all, “the most important election of our lifetime” has occurred over and over—at least since such language was used in attacking Pennsylvania Governor Thomas McKean during his 1805 reelection campaign.

But Reagan was onto something. Johnson’s victory paved the way for the Great Society, including the so-called War on Poverty and wholesale government incursion into American health care. The Great Society is the poster child of unintended consequences: undermining individual responsibility and self-sufficiency, creating dependency, eroding family structure, and sowing the seeds for much of the dysfunction afflicting American health care. Perhaps Goldwater never stood a chance in 1964, but Lyndon B. Johnson’s legacy haunts us to this day. (And beyond, as Medicaid and Medicare are huge contributors to our looming national insolvency.)

And, despite my reluctance to call any point in our lives a turning point, is today another “Time for Choosing”?

If we had an alert system for public policy, the threat level would probably read “harrowing.” Our lack of fiscal and monetary responsibility has reached new lows. The spending orgy seemed to reach a crescendo in 2020, but that just primed the pump for continuing blowouts that bear no relation to the needs of the pandemic or the needs of infrastructure. Even former Treasury secretary Larry Summers has called out his own blue team for using

the current crisis as an excuse to ramp up spending beyond any level justified by the pandemic. And, of course, the unified Democratic government in Washington is a threat in many other areas as well: climate regulation, the unconstitutional mess of H.R. 1, and identity politics to name a few.

On the other side, conservatives no longer even pay lip service to cutting spending or reforming entitlements. A new concern is currently in vogue among many Republicans seeking working class votes: populist economics, which is critical of capitalism and free enterprise, supportive of industrial policy, and not shy about advocating the unconstitutional use of government power to punish enemies or benefit chosen constituencies.

I fear we’re at a crossroads where the American political landscape could look more and more like Europe has for so long: parties of the left favoring radical government interventions and parties of the right that make their peace with big government and fail to stand up for capitalism, free enterprise, and a radically smaller role for the state. Add toxic populism to the mix and the picture’s not pretty.

So, it is a time for choosing.

For choosing to recommit to principles and sound ideas over politics and party lines. For choosing to double down on the principled defense of individual liberty, limited government, free markets, and peace: the values on which the American republic was founded and which over the course of two centuries have created unprecedented human flourishing. And for choosing to make whatever exertions and sacrifices are necessary—even in the most challenging times—to ensure future generations receive the same blessings of liberty that we have enjoyed.

Thank you so much for your support of Cato’s principled stand and of our work to safeguard the ideas of liberty. Thank you for affirming our efforts to perform more strongly every day, delivering more impact and reaching larger and more diverse audiences with our message. Thank you for your generous support, which in the past year exceeded all other years in Cato’s history. In short, thank you for choosing.