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CONSERVATISM

Conservatism today may be seen as a response to social and economic programs initiated by liberals in the thirty or more years stretching from the New Deal of the 1930s through the 1960s. Contemporary conservatives tend to argue that the liberal social programs instituted in those years to "promote the general welfare" have, instead, discouraged individual responsibility and over-regulated the economy.

When asked to what extent the government can or should intervene in individual behavior, a conservative is likely to promote individual freedom as an ideal but to think that Americans have gone too far in the direction of individual freedom and have abandoned many traditional moral principles. When asked what to do about a rise in teenage pregnancies, for instance, a conservative might answer: "Reemphasize personal morality. Stop teaching birth control in the schools and stop constantly exposing young people to sex in movies and other entertainment." In the realm of individual behavior, then, today's conservatives tend to accept some types of regulation.

When asked about government social programs or economic regulations, however, a modern conservative might say: "Government has grown too large and bureaucratic, too removed from local control; its intrusion into our lives is creating resentment, trampling on our rights, reducing personal responsibility, and stifling the economic growth that will do more for the good of our citizens than any government programs can do." In short, conservatives tend to think that smaller and more local government is preferable to the national government. Conservatives also tend to argue that a free-market economy will do more for the general welfare of society than will government regulation of the economy.

Many conservatives focus on issues of personal morality or behavior, such as family breakdown or crime. As Barbara Dafoe Whitehead writes: "The principal source of family decline over the past three decades has been cultural. It has to do with the ascendancy of a set of values that have been destructive of commitment, obligation, responsibility, and sacrifice—and particularly destructive of the claims of children on adult attention and commitment."⁴

William Bennett, author of the 1993 best-seller *The Book of Virtues*, offers the following ways in which public policies have contributed to what he calls "cultural decline":

⁴Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "The New Family Values," *Utne Reader* May-June 1993: 65. [Excerpted from *Family Affairs* (Summer 1992).]

- We say that we desire from our children more civility and responsibility, but in many of our schools we steadfastly refuse to teach right and wrong.
- We say that we want law and order in the streets, but we allow criminals, including violent criminals, to return to those same streets.
- We say that we want to stop illegitimacy, but we continue to subsidize the kind of behavior that virtually guarantees high rates of illegitimacy.
- We say that we want to discourage teenage sexual activity, but in classrooms all across America educators are more eager to dispense condoms than moral guidance.
- We say that we want more families to stay together, but we liberalize divorce laws and make divorce easier to attain.
- We say that we want to achieve a color blind society and judge people by the content of their character, but we continue to count by race, skin and pigment.
- We say that we want to encourage virtue and honor among the young, but it has become a mark of sophistication to shun the language of morality.⁵

Not all conservatives have the same focus. On the whole, however, when they discuss personal behavior, today's conservatives are likely to emphasize morality and personal responsibility rather than individual liberties; conservatives may even support limits on private behavior. On the other hand, when conservatives discuss the economic realm, they tend to emphasize liberty or freedom—to want smaller government and fewer social programs supported by tax dollars. Although there are some important differences among conservatives, the patterns of concern for personal responsibility and small government nevertheless stand out. The following set of readings provides further insights into the conservative stance.

LIBERALISM

Contemporary liberalism is rooted not only in the Declaration of Independence but also in the social and economic programs that began in the 1930s and extended through the 1960s, from President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal to President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society. Liberals today continue

to believe that the federal government should protect individual liberties and promote the general welfare by providing a safety net for the least fortunate.

Some conservatives argue that solving the problems of today's families requires changes in behavior, such as a renewed commitment to traditional moral standards. To such an argument, a liberal might reply: "The old morality was based partly on the inequality of women, and a return to the family or the moral values of the 1950s would trample on the newly achieved rights of women. Changes in the contemporary American family are the result of women's liberation, economic change, and the need for two-income families." This hypothetical liberal argues, then, that the rights of one group (women, in this example) cannot be subordinated for the sake of a vague general good. Today's liberal tends to value individual rights and to be wary of restrictions on personal behavior.

But this same liberal might answer a conservative very differently when government regulation of the economy is at issue. For example, a liberal might say: "Look at the problems society already has and look at the role of large corporations. Government regulations are there to keep powerful individuals or groups from trampling on the rights of the less powerful but also to help build roads and schools and provide for other benefits that individuals could not achieve on their own." In this liberal argument, government plays a crucial role in promoting the general welfare, refereeing the economy, and reducing inequality.

Barbara Presley Noble, for example, argued in 1994 against critics of big government by citing this list of important safeguards that the federal government has enacted since the 1930s:

- The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which established the minimum wage, the 40-hour work week, and overtime pay and restricted the use of child labor.
- The National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which grants the right of employees to form unions and bargain collectively.
- The Social Security Act of 1935, the employment-based savings program intended to cushion the impact of retirement and old age, unemployment, and the death of the household wage earner.
- The Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title VII of which outlaws discrimination on the basis of gender, race, color, religion or national origin in the workplace.
- The Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, governing safety in the workplace.
- The Employment Retirement Security Act of 1974, or Erisa, the devilishly complicated body of law that protects pensions [...].⁶

Liberals today are also likely to differ with conservatives about moral values. This difference may occur because liberals distrust what conservatives say about morality or because they think economic policies and conditions—not moral breakdown—are the most important cause of social problems. For instance, Arlene Skolnick makes this liberal contribution to the debate about family values:

⁶Barbara Presley Noble, "A Fond Farewell to Big Government," *New York Times* 13 Nov. 1994: F25.

Instead of debating the merits of Murphy Brown or the Waltons vs. the Simpsons, we should be discussing how to help families cope with the real problems of family life [...] the need to have two or more incomes to make ends meet, the unaffordability of housing and health care, the inadequacy of child care, the spread of Depression-era conditions, the disgraceful number of children living in poverty.⁷

Skolnick's point is that family problems derive from economic pressures and that it is somewhat hypocritical to try to solve such problems simply by calling for a return to morality. Ronald Dworkin emphasizes this point as well when he explains the social and economic sides of liberalism:

Liberalism has two aspects, and they are both under powerful attack. Liberals believe, first, that government must be neutral in matters of personal morality, that it must leave people free to live as they think best so long as they do not harm others. But the Reverend Jerry Falwell, and other politicians who claim to speak for some "moral majority," want to enforce their own morality with the steel of the criminal law. They know what kind of sex is bad, which books are fit for public libraries, what place religion should have in education and family life, when human life begins, that contraception is sin, and that abortion is capital sin. They think the rest of us should be forced to practice what they preach. The old issue of political theory—whether the law should enforce a state morality—is once again an important issue of practical politics.

The second side of liberalism is economic. Liberals insist that government has a responsibility to reduce economic inequality, both through its management of the economy and through welfare programs that redistribute wealth to soften the impact of poverty.⁸

As you read the essays by liberals, keep Dworkin's distinctions in mind: that liberals distrust government interference in personal morality but aim to use government to reduce economic inequality.

Today's liberal, then, is more likely than today's conservative to endorse government programs, arguing that the changes in the nature and the size of the economy over the last two centuries require more government intervention and regulation than were required when America was smaller. Liberals sometimes argue that, in the Founders' time, people needed protection *from* tyrannical governments but that now people need government intervention to limit the excesses of modern capitalism and to extend freedom to all citizens.

As you read the following arguments, note particularly what the writers say about freedom, individual rights, and the role of government. Also remember to keep track of key terms and concepts, as you were asked to do for the earlier readings, and to look for newspaper columns and interviews on the three civic stances.

⁷Arlene Skolnick, "There's 'Family' at the Microwave," *Los Angeles Times* 9 Aug. 1992.

⁸Ronald Dworkin, "Neutrality, Equality, and Liberalism," *Liberalism Reconsidered*, ed. Douglas MacLean and Claudia Mills (Totowa: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983) 1. [Reprinted with permission from *New York Review of Books*, 1983].

Libertarianism

The following tasks are designed to help you think about the relationship between the market and the state with

regard to Rosenblatt's article. Toward the end of the article, Rosenblatt asks you to consider a few or specific

aspects of the market. In paragraphs 8-10, Dionne

argues that the market should not be "the sole arbiter of public policy." Do you agree? Why or why not?

Kristin Luker's argument. If you completed the earlier writer's assignment, you may have found yourself in agreement with her view. Do you agree with her argument?

Write a few sentences explaining your position. Do you think the government should regulate abortion? Why or why not? What should help you understand

the issues and explain liberal? If you prefer, you may write a paragraph and then try to

define the terms. Use the definitions to

write you

5. Write a paragraph on page 272 appeared in the book. Do you agree with a liberal or conservative? Why or why not? Do you think the government should regulate abortion? Why or why not?

LIBERTARIANISM

Like liberals and conservatives, libertarians can trace their ideas back to the Declaration of Independence, but libertarianism as a modern political movement has gained most of its strength in the last few decades.

The libertarian is likely to side with the liberal on some issues and with the conservative on others, in each case choosing whichever position advocates the greatest liberty. On issues involving individual behavior and civil rights, for instance, the libertarian might side with the liberal, arguing for civil



liberties like freedom of expression. The libertarian, however, is likely to go farther than the liberal, advocating freedom from regulations on illegal drugs, cigarette smoking, youth curfews, pornography, prostitution, gun use, electronic mail, and so on, whereas the liberal would probably accept regulations on some of those behaviors.

On economic issues, the libertarian is likely to side with the conservative or take a more extreme position. When asked about national economic well-being or programs to create jobs, the libertarian might argue: “The government has no role in creating jobs and will only make a mess of things. Cut or abolish income taxes. Reduce government to a minimum. If we can keep the government out of our lives, we’ll all be more prosperous.”

Though there is an official Libertarian Party, libertarians have probably had more influence on people’s ideas than on their votes or their political party affiliations. There is some evidence, for instance, that libertarian views are becoming more popular with some college students, particularly those in the computer sciences, and among employees in computer companies who chafe at government regulations. There is a strong connection between libertarian and conservative ideas for some people, and there are many Republicans who hold both libertarian and conservative sympathies. Many current Republican politicians, for instance, hold some libertarian ideas on issues like free trade, though other conservative Republicans disagree with them. At the same time, however, libertarians are likely to disagree with some conservative beliefs about social behavior. For the essay you will write in this chapter, it will be

easier, as suggested before, to avoid equating any one of these civic stances with any particular political party.

The following statement by Harry Browne points up some libertarian beliefs. Browne, who ran for president in 1996 on the Libertarian Party ticket, argues not only that government wastes money but that it encourages behavior most Americans disapprove of:

By the 1990s the welfare system was a shambles. In 1991 the federal government spent \$676 billion on social welfare of one kind or another—20 times the 1962 level—and state and local governments spent \$489 billion, largely to qualify for federal welfare programs.

Social welfare spending by all levels of government had increased to \$1,165 billion (\$1.1 trillion) in 1991, from \$63 billion in 1962.

The money spent for public assistance (what we think of as pure welfare) by all levels of government increased to \$180 billion in 1991 from \$5 billion in 1962—the year President Kennedy promised to reform the system. . . .

Welfare costs us plenty. But it also destroys lives. It perverts the natural incentives of everyone who is touched by it. Here are some examples:

- AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) pays money to Mom only if there's no Dad at home, so—surprise!—Dad goes away.
- A teenage girl can become independent of her parents by getting pregnant; otherwise, she must live off her parents and obey their rules. Which life is more attractive to most teenagers?
- Federal job-training for welfare recipients circumvents the need for a teenager to stay in school and learn how to make a living.
- The income test for welfare makes a low-paying job seem pointless. This eliminates the incentive for a young person to get the all-important first job, and so he never gains the experience needed to get a job that would pay more than welfare.
- Medicaid reduces the incentive, especially among the young, to avoid injury and disease.
- The availability of welfare reduces the incentive to save for emergencies. And once people don't have savings, what else can they do but go on welfare when trouble strikes?

The people who have been seduced by welfare have become wards of the state, unable to fend for themselves, with no self-respect and no self-confidence.⁹

Browne seems concerned here primarily with the economic aspects of welfare. Some libertarians, though, focus less on economics and more on behavior and the social realm, believing that individuals should be able to engage in any kind of behavior that does not harm others. These libertarians advocate legalizing drugs, for instance, on the grounds that the state has no business

⁹Harry Browne, *Why Government Doesn't Work* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995) 121.

trying to regulate drug use for the well-being of the individual—that individuals should be free to make decisions about their own lives, even to harm themselves if they so wish.

An example of this social and moral libertarianism can be seen in the remarks of writer and college professor Camille Paglia, who makes the following distinctions in an interview with the editor of *Reason*, a libertarian magazine:

I feel that government has no right to intrude into the private realm of consensual behavior. Therefore, I say that I'm for the abolition of all sodomy laws. I'm for abortion rights. I'm for the legalization of drugs—consistent with alcohol regulations. I'm for not just the decriminalization but the legalization of prostitution. Again, prostitutes must not intrude into the public realm. I think it's perfectly reasonable to say that civil authorities have the right to say that prostitutes should not be loitering near schools, or on the steps of churches, or blocking entrances to buildings and so on. Prostitution should be perfectly legal, but it cannot interfere with other people's access to the public realm.¹⁰

This sort of distinction—between private behavior and behavior that harms others—is often important to libertarian arguments. Libertarians may disagree with each other about the *degree* to which there should be liberty from controls and regulations, but they consistently argue for freedom in both the social and the economic realms. Because they advocate liberty so consistently, libertarians may sharply disagree at times with liberals and conservatives.

As you read the following arguments, note what sorts of good libertarians think will come from greater liberty and why. Also remember to keep track of key terms and concepts and to look for newspaper columns and interviews on the three civic stances.

CAPITALISM AND FREEDOM

Milton Friedman

Milton Friedman, an economist and advocate of free enterprise, was awarded the 1976 Nobel Prize in Economics. He has been a professor of economics at the University of Chicago and a fellow at the Hoover Institution, a conservative and libertarian think tank at Stanford University. He is the author of numerous articles and books, including Capitalism and Freedom (1962), from which this reading comes.

Friedman did his early economic work during the Cold War period following World War II, when many people thought that the Soviet Union and its Communist allies would do better economically than capitalist countries like the United

¹⁰ Camille Paglia, interview with Virginia I. Postrel, *Reason* Aug.-Sept. 1995: 38.