

SUNDAY FORUM

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Liberalism: the next four years

By Walter H. Capps

Chalk it up to wishful thinking, if you will. But William Safire is not the only analyst of the contemporary political scene who believes that liberalism will rise forcefully again, and not many seasons from now. Writing in *The New York Times*, Safire hypothesizes, "If I were starting out in politics today, I would identify myself as a New Liberal." His argument is that conservatism is the wave of the present, while a different approach, with new ideas, will be the wave of the future.

Intellectual positions do become more resilient when they are challenged to fight their way into environments at least partially inimical to them. Candidates for public office always find the going easier when they can sharply criticize the status quo. The force of the pre-Nov. 4 rhetoric about the diabolical nature of bureaucracy illustrates this observation vividly. And liberalism did lose esteem during the four years of Jimmy Carter's presidency. While ascending to a place of influence, it relinquished the position from which cutting-edge criticism of prevailing power could be advanced.

The "malaise" President Carter detected in July, 1979, was perhaps less a sign of the country's diminished collective ambition, and more an acknowledgement that liberalism had proven to be ineffectual. So clearly was this recognized in the months immediately following that few politicians could afford to identify with the liberal cause. More prudent to call oneself a "moderate," or as Walter Mondale described himself, "a progressive in the Hubert Humphrey tradition." Even Senator Kennedy, who could delight the Democratic Convention with his dramatic restatement of the liberal creed, was unable to win as defender of the same slogans.

What next?

Safire believes it imperative that liberals create new formulas to guarantee more freedom to the individual while assuring more security for everyone. But neither of these can be offered without satisfying the requirements of the other. And yet, everyone knows, it is an elusive combination to acquire.

And by what mechanisms will the intellectual reconstruction take place?

The Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions was established in the late fifties to identify and create clear alternatives within a political and ideological climate which was symbolized by the McCarthy probe. Its vocation was to secure human rights and civil liberties against the threats of this powerful force. It remained strong to the extent that it criticized perceptively and as long as there was really something there to criticize. It languished, in time, when the alternatives it championed could hardly be distinguished from new or reconstructed prevailing opinion. When it no longer faced sharp opposition, its critical capacities became dulled, diluted, and, in some instances, redirected introspectively. And whatever positive or constructive force yet remained could not compete with what the prevailing viewpoint could do or achieve by its own ability.

But it may be a new day. The success of the American system of government depends upon an effective dialogue between progressive and conservative points of view. The assumption of new power by one of them always forces the other to reassess its convictions in light of its failures and of the demands of the new situation. The play back and forth holds the promise of stimulating fresh intellectual inventiveness.

It seems auspicious that the Hutchins Center is being rejuvenated in precisely the same moment that liberals recognize they have the most ground to make up. The drama here, not to mention the proximity of Refugio Canyon, should make the next four years intensely interesting for citizens of the Santa Barbara area.

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