



TOO MUCH TO TAKE

By William F. Buckley, Jr.

We conservatives have suffered a great deal. Twenty years of political impotence; two score years of intellectual inertia; abusive speeches, articles, columns and books that, piled on top of each other, would tower arrogantly over the gates of heaven -- all this our dwindling cadre has borne and, withal, patiently. But I, for one, am now suffering from a sprained back.

For in the last year or so, confident no doubt that there is little left to be said with respect to how this country ought to be run, our restless and expansive collectivists have wandered afield, this time to ravish us in the inner sanctity of our boudoirs: they are now telling us how we conservatives ought to act, and, in the course of it all, what "conservatism" really is!

This last has become a lively pastime for the "liberals". It was most brazenly touched off, as far as I know, in the early spring of 1950 by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who wrote for the New York Times Sunday magazine an article, "Needed: An Intelligent Opposition", or some such title. The ink wasn't dry when Herbert Agar tackled the same subject for Harper's, in which he outlined carefully what conservatives ought to think, say and do. Chester Bowles and Henry Steele Commager and scores of others have carried the banner forward in their head-on rush to save "conservatism" from the abysses in which it will flounder if the conservatives are left to their own resources. They tell us we must refashion our thinking "if we wish to serve our country". (Or, better still, to avoid provincialism, "if we wish to serve the world".)

Their arguments all follow a pattern: "Look, gentlemen, why don't you face up to the fact that a social revolution has occurred in the United States in the last several decades. No jeremiaids, no melancholy post-mortems are going to change this. Social Security, farm parities, progressive income taxes, irredeemable paper currency, a large and entrenched bureaucracy, withering state borders, powerful unions -- all these are here to stay. Why not acknowledge them and formulate a constructive alternative to the Democratic Platform, an alternative which

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will accept the foregoing reforms and focus, accordingly, on some new, intelligent casi belli -- such as, for example, administrative procedure, efficient management, and the like. Yours are negative policies. You're always against this or that; you seldom come forward with original and constructive legislation of your own. As firm believers in democracy, we 'liberals' believe there ought to be more than one political party; but the way it's been going, what we have in fact amounts to just one party, because you don't seem to learn your quadrennial embarrassments notwithstanding, that your reactionary program is unacceptable."

II

Incredibly, this approach electrifies many conservatives, and leaves them impressed and agog. It must be the force of habit that causes so many individualists to resign themselves to the invincibility of "liberal" dicta. For it is these counsels that are molding the thinking of many elements of the Republican Party, nominally the "Opposition Party".

Witness the popularity of Stassen with the Young Republican Club in 1948, the clamor of so many "conservatives" for a "progressive" Republican Party, the happy, burgeoning group of Eastern Progressives and their increasing power in the Senate. See the emergence of the New York Herald Tribune, that unbelievably unprincipled and opportunistic news-sheet, as the spokesman for New Republicanism. Surely, if the metamorphosis of the conservative opposition continues in this direction, it won't be long before we have satisfied Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., of our patriotism. And this seems to be the most ambitious goal of many good Republicans.

How is it, I'd like to know, that so many of us heed and even solicit the counsel of our sworn enemies, the collectivists? To begin with, what reason have we to believe that they are acting in good faith when they spell out to us a platform which, they insist, might woo the American people away from their demigods, the Democrats? I should as soon believe that Schlesinger, Agar, et al, are altruistically concerned over the prosperity of Republicanism as I would that the Soviet Union is interested in nourishing democracy.

What so many Republicans have been guilelessly willing to interpret as benevolent and detached advice on how they ought to conduct themselves is in fact something else: it is nothing more than a typical symptom of the "liberals'" obsessive desire to distend bipartisanship -- as it has been applied, for example, to foreign policy -- to all other issues as well. It is a well-calculated maneuver to destroy, rather than to construct, an intelligent and meaningful opposition.

This is in the collectivist tradition. Deviations are as heinous to the New Dealer as they are to the Stalinist. But for a few minor embellishments, the demagoguery of the Reuther or the Charlie Michelson is as intolerant of the opposition as that of the Gromyko or the Ehrenburg; and it is natural that this be so. For after all, socialism scorns competition. It follows naturally that competition at the most crucial echelon -- national policy -- should appear most appalling to the Statists, and that they should, accordingly, focus their best energies to proscribing any significant policy alternatives at this level.

An additional reason explains the collectivist anxiety for homogeneity in national policy. While the American individualist hearkens always to one hundred and fifty million human beings, all of whom ought not be impeded from harboring and implementing one hundred and fifty million convictions and policies, the collectivists' concern is with one policy, the State's policy. And there is only one State. Their stakes are therefore high, for it's win the State or lose the battle. Since the Statists have never been squeamish about their methods, it is only natural that they should exploit every potential ally; and a most valuable ally has always been the conservative, whose demonstrated gullibility makes him easy prey.

And how do they camouflage these raw tactics? Advice from collectivists to individualists is automatically suspect. So, they tag their concern for a flourishing opposition as stemming from their solicitude for the democratic fabric of our institutions, which presupposes the existence of at least two political parties. This way they can destroy the opposition in the name of "democracy", which leaves them feeling clean all over.

III

It's not too early -- and not too late, let's hope -- to anticipate the forthcoming caucuses, primaries, and the lot, that will crystallize in the early summer of next year into a Republican Party Platform. Shall we be able to conduct ourselves without reference to the Schlesinger-Agar book on Political Behavior and Policy Formation? Dare we risk the displeasure of the "liberals" by adopting a platform which, on the domestic level at least, rings forth with a clear alternative to, and an equally clear denunciation of, the collectivism of the Democrats?

Several questions are posed here. The first is, can the Republicans win if they publicly decry the "social revolution" which we are enjoined to respect as a fait accompli? The second, of course, is do we care about winning if we don't do just that?

One thing we know: in the past we have temporized with collectivism and we have lost. And after the campaigns were over, we were left not with the exhilaration and pride of having done our best to restore freedom, but with the sickening humiliation of having failed to seduce the American people because we were pitted against a more glib, a more extravagant, a more experienced gigolo.

Assuming, then, that we shall campaign in behalf of what we feel in our hearts and minds to be in the best interests of the American people, will our program appear to be a negative one? Most certainly it will. For it will call for the abolition of Federal power and control wherever possible. It will call for the abolition of farm, school, and house subsidies, social security, controls, government loans and financing, pork barrelling, special privileges, and much more that is "negative".

All such legislation continues to imply that the State can better administer social power, that the central government knows better than the people, acting individually or through their local governments, how best to spend the people's money. If we are guilty of "negativism" in calling for the pruning of State power, then at least we have honorable bedfellows in our Constitutional fathers.

IV

Frederick von Hayek stated in the Road to Serfdom that the line that separated individualism from collectivism is clear-cut. Those of us who believe this to be so ought to acknowledge that line and give the American people an opportunity to step to one side of it or to the other. To that end, I respectfully sketch out the following thoughts as a possible basis for a preamble to the Republican Party's 1952 platform:

"The American people are engaged in two wars -- the one against Russian imperialism, the other against government paternalism. Only history will tell whether Joseph Stalin or Franklin Roosevelt will have wrought greater damage to individual freedom in the United States.

"Our task today is to cast off defiantly the influence of both offenders. Our foreign policy must aim at the destruction of Soviet power; and our domestic aim is the dissolution of the bureaucracy consistent with waging an effective fight against Stalinism. Both struggles must be won, or neither is worth winning."

As for the hoots and cries from the Schlesingers, let them come. After all, their program still has a ways to go before they can shut us up forcibly.

God and Man at Yale, by William F. Buckley, Jr., is scheduled for publication in October, by Henry Regnery Co., Chicago.

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