

Talking Right

How Conservatives Turned Liberalism Into
a Tax-Raising, Latte-Drinking, Sushi-Eating,
Volvo-Driving, *New York Times*-Reading,
Body-Piercing, Hollywood-Loving,
Left-Wing Freak Show

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chapter three

Trashing the L-word



Given the aversion this word inspires in Democratic candidates, future civilizations sifting through the rubble may well conclude that “liberal” was a euphemism for “pederast” or “serial killer.”

—Timothy Noah, 1986

In 1960, the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* published an article by the philosopher Charles Frankel called “A Liberal Is a Liberal Is a . . .” Frankel observed that it was hard to find a major figure in American politics who had not had a kind word to say about liberalism, from Hoover to Truman or Taft to Eisenhower. Indeed, he said, “anyone who today identifies himself as an unmitigated opponent of liberalism . . . cannot aspire to influence on the national political scene.”

Frankel noted that even politicians who indulged in attacks on “liberals” were always careful to qualify the word. Southern conservatives complained about “Northern liberals,” and usually added that they themselves were liberals in matters of social welfare. Even Senator McCarthy usually restricted himself to attacking “phony liberals,” leaving open the inference, as Frankel put it, “that he had nothing against genuine liberals, if only he could find one.”

Frankel’s article was accompanied by a cartoon that showed a group of politicians labeled “Left-Wing Democrat,” “Middle-Wing Democrat,”

"Right-Wing Republican," and so forth, all sitting at a table in front of a TV camera and applying makeup from jars bearing labels like "Liberal Cream," "Liberal #7," and "Do-It-Yourself Liberal Kit."

If that cartoon were run again today, the jars would all contain vanishing cream. Nowadays not even most politicians on the left wing of the Democratic party are willing to own up to being liberals. When someone presses them, they either dismiss the significance of labels in general or acknowledge the label defensively, the way Howard Dean did during the 2003 primary season: "If being a liberal means a balanced budget, I'm a liberal." (As Ann Coulter observes, for once accurately: "The surest sign one is dealing with a liberal is his refusal to grant meaning to the word 'liberal.'") And ordinary voters are equally wary of the label. Over recent decades, the number of Americans willing to describe themselves as liberals has been hovering around 20 percent, with around 35 percent describing themselves as conservatives, and the rest opting for "moderate" or "middle of the road."

It's tempting to see the declining fortunes of the liberal label simply as a sign of the shift to the right among the American electorate: if people have rejected *liberal*, it must be because they've rejected liberalism. Granted, liberalism was never a precise doctrine, particularly in the postwar decades, when its tent was spread so wide. But however liberalism was defined, there's no question that its appeal began to diminish shortly after its high-water mark in the Kennedy years. It was partly the victim of a complacency born of its own successes. Already in 1955, Richard Hofstadter was writing that "the dominant force in our political life no longer comes from the liberals who made the New Deal possible." But it was also challenged by the white backlash to civil rights legislation, the perceived failure of Great Society social programs, and the bitter divisions over the Vietnam War. Before long, liberalism was under assault from both the New Right and the New Left—it was just a few years after the Frankel article appeared that the folksinger Phil Ochs released "Love Me, I'm a Liberal," a sardonic catalog of liberal hypocrisies ("I love Puerto Ricans and Negroes /as long as they don't move next door").

By the late 1970s, liberalism was already associated with "profligacy, spinelessness, malevolence, masochism, elitism, fantasy, anarchy, idealism, softness, irresponsibility, and sanctimoniousness." And then on August 14, 1988, Ronald Reagan made the stigma quasi-official when he told the 1988 Republican National Convention, "The masquerade is over. It's time to . . . say the dreaded L-word; to say the policies of our opposition are liberal, liberal, liberal."

Rather than owning up to the label, the Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis tried to change the subject, responding that "the L-word of this campaign is 'leadership.'" That strategy suited the purposes of his opponent, George H.W. Bush, who made a running gag out of Dukakis's coyness about acknowledging the label. Dukakis, he said, had avoided appearing on *Wheel of Fortune* because "[h]e was afraid that Vanna might turn over the L-word." It wasn't until a few days before the election that Dukakis finally got around to saying, a little defensively, "Yes, I'm a liberal, in the tradition of Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman and John Kennedy." The declaration was treated as major news ("Dukakis Uses L-Word" was the page-one headline in the *Boston Globe*). But the damage was done by then, not just to the Dukakis campaign but to the liberal label, which would be branded from then on as "the L-word," according to the familiar formula we use when we want to pretend a word is unspeakable. By now, it's considered noteworthy when a politician admits to being a liberal. Even in supposedly "liberal" papers like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, liberals are four times as likely as conservatives to be described as "unapologetic" or "unabashed." In this day and age, it's assumed that liberalism is something most people would have qualms about owning up to.

But if voters are reluctant to declare themselves liberals nowadays, they haven't bailed out on most of the views that defined liberalism in the past. By substantial margins, Americans feel that the Democrats would do a better job than the Republicans at taking care of the environment, making the tax system fair, safeguarding Social Security, and improving the health care system. In a 2003 CBS–New York Times poll, only 11 percent of respondents believed the president's tax cuts were very likely to create new jobs, which a lot of people would take as a central tenet of

conservative faith. And the overwhelmingly negative response to the Bush administration's efforts to privatize Social Security in 2005 made it clear that Americans were not prepared to throw the most important achievements of the New Deal aside in the name of "the ownership society." In short, Americans seem to have a lot more misgivings about the liberal label than about liberal ideas. The real shift to the right has been among the Republican leadership and party activists, who have moved much farther to the right of the American mainstream than the Democrats have moved left. And they've dragged political discourse along with them.

In fact, the whole idea of liberalism as a political doctrine sometimes seems to be beside the point these days. The word itself isn't used nearly as much as it used to be—today, the media talk about liberals a great deal more than they talk about liberalism. And when *liberalism* comes up, it's usually in phrases like "West Side liberalism" or "Hollywood liberalism," where it suggests a social clique rather than a philosophical school—"Hollywood liberalism" isn't the same sort of thing as "Chicago economics." These days, it's as if being a liberal has less to do with a commitment to a particular -ism than with being a political fashion victim. What were once regarded as political ideals have become merely the ancillary signs of a decadent lifestyle.

The trashing of the liberal label is one of the most significant changes in the language of American politics in recent times. By now, most of the politicians who would have proudly called themselves liberals forty years ago have abandoned the name, if not the liberal worldview. Even those who identify with liberal principles are more likely to describe themselves as "progressives"—something like what the Ford Motor Company did in 1960 when it discontinued the Edsel line but continued to market the same car with a different grille and trim under the name of Galaxie. The fact is, the progressive label has been on something of a tear. It's used not just by activists who inherited the New Left's disdain for liberals, but by centrists and old-fashioned pols. It figures in the name of the Progressive Policy Institute of the centrist Democratic Leadership

Council. And during the 2003 gubernatorial recall election, California governor Gray Davis said that he was confident he would prevail because "I don't think they're going to replace my progressive agenda with a conservative agenda"—this from a Democrat who was not exactly known for cruising in the party's left lane.

Progressive has its advantages: it conveys the right message to Nation-reading, Pacifica-listening voters without connoting anything negative to the majority of the electorate—to most, in fact, it doesn't connote much of anything at all. And the word clearly irks the right, as you can tell from the way conservative publications like *National Review* tend to set it in quotation marks, the form of passive resistance that's used by those who have allowed the other side to stake out the linguistic territory. Some conservatives have even tried to usurp the word. Shortly after the 2004 election, the Seattle *Post-Intelligencer's* Julia Youngs wrote that "George W. Bush kept the presidency because he was the more progressive candidate." Bush's victory, she said, was a sign that voters repudiated the left's resistance to "progressive ideas" like proactive pursuit of terrorists, limitations on abortion, privatization of Social Security, and the flat tax. If actual progressives could get past the butter-wouldn't-melt effrontery of that statement, they might find the appropriation of their label flattering.

Has *liberal* had its day? Seventy years is a pretty good run for a political label, and perhaps some day *liberal* will be replaced by *progressive* or some other term, particularly if the nation has to undergo an upheaval comparable to the Great Depression. But labels have returned from near-oblivion before. Fifty years ago, *conservative* was on the ropes; in a 1949 editorial, the *Wall Street Journal* said:

If a man eschews extreme fads in clothing himself, we say he is a conservative dresser and we are more inclined to employ him in our business or be seen in his company. If a banker is described as conservative most people are more inclined to trust their money to his care. But if a man is described as a "conservative" in politics then the reaction to him is very likely to be altogether different. He is likely to be suspected of wanting to

cheat widows and orphans and generally to be a bad fellow who associates with a lot of other bad fellows. Consequently very few people will admit they are conservatives and if they are accused they will go to great lengths to prove otherwise . . . [Conservatives] have been propagandized and bullied into believing that they must shun a word and the word is the very one that describes their attitude.

You could write the same article today substituting *liberal* for *conservative* (though you might have trouble getting the *Journal* to print it). "Everyone has a good word for liberal benefactors and liberal helpings of potatoes . . ."

Still, the liberal label still has its defenders, not just because of the tradition of thought it stands for, but because it would be a strategic error to abandon it. For the present, the opposition between liberals and conservatives is too deeply etched in the language and on the media's split screens to be dropped anytime soon, particularly with the right hammering incessantly on the "elite liberals" theme. *Liberal* is the word that ordinary people use when they're talking about political polarities, and Democrats who avoid it in favor of *progressive* seem to confirm the widespread suspicion that liberals aren't talking the same language as other Americans, even when it comes to pronouncing their own name right.*

For as long as the Democrats refuse to come to terms with the liberal label, it will continue to dog them. As Dukakis learned, a candidate's reluctance to acknowledge the label may often strike voters as a sign of unwillingness to own up to his principles. And it's a fair bet that John Kerry's refusal to call himself a liberal helped him less among centrists than it hurt him among voters of all stripes who already had doubts about his constancy of principle.

What's worse, the Democrats' phobia about the liberal label has given the right free rein to define the word in its own terms, pushing the meaning of *liberal* to the political margins. There was a time when *liberal* and

* Some on the right have taken to using *progressive* as a disparaging term—Bill O'Reilly likes to rail at "secular progressives." That might ultimately help to establish the label in general usage, but not exactly as a neutral replacement for *liberal*.

leftist were contrasting terms; now the right tends to use them interchangeably.* Not long ago, in fact, the Republican minority leader of the South Carolina Senate described a Democratic legislator as "one of the most liberal leftists that we have in the House"—not an uncommon wording these days, which implies that *liberal* has actually outflanked *leftist* as a term for extreme political views. It's a vicious circle: the more Democrats shun the liberal label, the easier it is for the right to demonize it, making Democrats even more reluctant to wear it than before. If the flight from the liberal label continues, self-avowed liberals may wind up like the Celts of medieval Europe, driven to the peripheries of the continent by invading tribes.

This isn't a problem only for the left and center-left of the Democratic party. True, there are plenty of individual Democrats who see no need for the liberal label, and even some centrists who rejoice in its imminent passing. But in the end, the eclipse of the label has left the party groping for a unifying philosophical center to fill the role that the broad-tent conception of liberalism did from the time of FDR to the Kennedy era. Mid-twentieth-century liberalism may not have been a very precise or stirring philosophy, or even a philosophy at all. Lionel Trilling described it back in 1951 as "a large tendency rather than a concise body of doctrine." But it did give Democrats a common touch point in a line of political tradition, just as conservatism does for today's Republicans.

"In a representative government," Franklin Roosevelt said in 1941, "there are usually two general schools of political belief—liberal and conservative. . . . Since at least since 1932, the Democratic Party has been the liberal party." Nowadays, to all but the right, the Democrats are merely the party formerly known as liberal. The absence of an ideological center haunts the party. Slogans like Clinton's "Opportunity, Responsibility, Community" may make for good photo backdrops, but they're too vague to provide the sense of party identity and tradition that a commitment to liberalism did in the past. A 2005 Democracy Corps survey found that 55

* On the Web, Martin Sheen and Susan Sarandon are more likely to be labeled leftists than Fidel Castro is.

percent of voters said the Republicans know what they stand for, as opposed to only 27 percent who said the same thing of the Democrats.

You can see the problem reflected in the media, where Republicans are identified in terms of an ideological reference point far more often than Democrats are. Middle-of-the-road Republicans like George Pataki or Rudy Giuliani are usually described as “moderates,” which locates them relative to the party’s mainstream, but middle-of-the-road Democrats like Evan Bayh and Max Baucus tend to be called “centrists,” which locates them relative to the broader political horizon. In fact, the press identifies politicians as “mainstream Republicans” four times as often as it identifies them as “mainstream Democrats,” and it is almost five times as likely to speak of Republicans as “true believers.” In the public mind, *Republican* names a movement, whereas *Democrat* is only a ZIP code.

There’s a certain self-delusion in Democrats’ avoidance of the L-word; it suggests that they really haven’t understood the magnitude of the linguistic shift that has taken place. Liberalism isn’t like a brand of automobile that has fallen out of favor—it can’t be reinvigorated simply by marketing it under a new name with a NASCAR-approved grille. The trashing of the liberal label is only the most obvious sign of a process that has rewritten whole pages of the American political dictionary, as familiar words have acquired new meanings that reflect a changed conception of what politics is about. Even if you could magically eradicate *liberal* from the collective consciousness, you wouldn’t dispel all the fatuous stereotypes that have accumulated around the word or reverse the broader shifts of political meaning that they stand in for. In the end, this really isn’t so much about reclaiming *liberal* as about redressing the shift in political language that the stigmatization of the liberal label stands in for. To understand what has happened to *liberal*, you have to understand how the right has rewritten the language of class.

chapter four

Class Dismissed

I wanna be a lawyer
 Doctor or professor
 A member of the UMC
 I’ll pretend to be liberal
 But I’ll still support the GOP,
 As part of the UMC.

—Bob Seger, “Upper Middle Class”

Like much of the new language of the right, the redefinition of *liberal* goes back to the Nixon years, as liberalism was coming under attack, and Vietnam and the fallout of the civil rights movement were opening new fissures in American society. Or I should really say the Agnew years, since it was Nixon’s vice president Spiro Agnew who pioneered the new populist tone of Republican rhetoric. Agnew’s phraseology was impishly sui generis—it’s hard to imagine Ronald Reagan or either of the Bushes describing his press critics as the “nattering nabobs of negativism” or “pusillanimous pussyfooters.” But with his coded appeals to “law and order” and his attacks on the “liberal intellectuals” who were destroying the country’s strength, the student radicals and hippies, and the “effete corps of impudent snobs” of the media, he became the Mrs. O’Leary’s cow of the culture wars.