



September 1, 2009

Exclusive: A Conflict of Visions

Robert Maynard

The 20th century has given rise to serious challenges to the American notion of human rights rooted in a vision of liberty and virtue. Cato Institute senior fellow Brink Lindsey points out in a September 28, 2001, article entitled, “The Last Totalitarians,” that the various challenges we have faced are merely different versions of a totalitarian reaction, which was sweeping the globe during the 19th century, to the American-inspired ideology of freedom. Osama bin Laden and the radical Jihadi ideology he represents is just the latest reaction to our notion liberty under law.

The totalitarian ideologies that we have faced are merely extreme manifestations of a contrasting vision rooted in Utopian Collectivism. This vision sees society as one collective whole with its members merely parts of the whole. A utopian society is believed to be possible if we just had the right people in charge to “Socially Engineer” the public good. This is to be accomplished via government action from the top down. Unfortunately, a somewhat milder version of this notion has infected the thinking of much of the “opinion shaping” cultural sectors and political leadership of Western society, the U.S. included, where it has become known as “liberalism.”

To understand how this has come about, we need to revisit the distinction between “Revolutionary Socialism” and “Evolutionary Socialism.” Communism and Nazism are examples of the former. (The term Nazi stands for “National Socialism.”) Revolutionary Socialists seek a violent overthrow of the existing order so that they can replace it with a socialist order. They are led by a small, well-disciplined cadre and membership in their organizations is restricted to the “true believers.” With the defeat of Nazism and the collapse of global Communism, many Revolutionary Socialists are in alignment with the goals of violent Jihadis, who they see as the best bet to tear down the existing capitalist order.

Although Revolutionary Socialism is the version with which most Americans are familiar, it is not the one that has

been the most successful in promoting socialist ideas within Western society. Evolutionary Socialists agree with Revolutionary Socialists about the end goal of a socialist society, but disagree over the proposed means to get there. They see the violent overthrow of the existing system as an unnecessary and impractical scheme, which would likely result in merely awakening the target society.

In their view, socialism will come gradually by transforming societies from within by infiltrating their institutions with socialist ideology. Evolutionary Socialist movements are not uniform, but vary according to those targeted. There is less of a focus on developing a disciplined leadership to guide the revolution. Instead, the focus is on the gradual, cumulative acceptance of socialist ideology by the target societies.

Further, they will partner with various special interest groups, which are not strictly socialist, but such groups must have an agenda that will expand the role of central government in order to advance the cause of socialism. For instance, Cultural Jihadism piggybacks on the gains made by evolutionary socialists in painting the West as an oppressive and unjust society of which Muslims are among its many victims. The remedy for such oppression is to grant all Muslims special entitlements to even the scales. This is why aspects of Islam are being taught in our school system despite our "Separation of Church and State." It is not so much that the Cultural Jihadis have that much political clout, but that they have been successful in labeling themselves a victim class and convincing us that education is needed to combat our ignorance, which invariably leads to oppression.

This strategy has been so effective that those Americans who oppose utopian schemes in the name of preserving our vision of liberty under law have come to be seen by their own leadership as selfish reactionaries at best, or dangerous extremists at worst. They are always known as "racists." The true irony, however, is that it is those who buy into the notion of Utopian Collectivism who are the real reactionaries.

This battle cannot be won by reacting politically to each threat to our liberties, on an issue-by-issue basis. The separate issues are part of an overall "Conflict of Visions." Those who seek to preserve our constitutional rights need to keep this in mind and constantly remind the world that they are engaged in a pro-active attempt to revive our vision of liberty to begin with, which has brought us so much prosperity.

Of course the aforementioned rights are enumerated in our Constitution. The U.S. Constitution was, however, a codification into law of certain principles held by our founders and their colonial predecessors. These principles were spelled out in the "Declaration of Independence." Understanding these principles, upon which our notion of rights is based, is the key to preserving such rights.

Those, however, who seek to realize a utopian order enforced via government from the top down, see our notion of individual liberty as a symptom of selfishness, which is bound to lead to chaos and destroy the public good. So the essential argument at hand is the nature of the relationship between the individual and society and how to realize the public good.

Our Declaration of Independence lists the following "Unalienable Rights:" ***"Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."***

The order in which they are listed reflects a view on how the public good is obtained in human society. Life, of course, is first because nothing else is possible without the precious gift of life. Liberty is next as it is fundamental to the striving of humans in society. As a being who bears the image of our creator, liberty is such an integral part of our nature that any attempt to realize the public good without upholding individual liberties is doomed to fail.

As already mentioned, there have been utopian schemes going all the way back to Plato's Republic, which saw society as one collective entity. The public good was achieved by rulers subordinating the "selfish" interests of individuals to the greater good of the larger society. The founders were well aware of these schemes and the historical fact that they end only in misery and tyranny as they violate the fundamental principles of human nature. The notion that human nature required the free association of individuals pursuing happiness to realize the public good was known as "Spontaneous Order."

Further clarification is in order here in regards to the "The Pursuit of Happiness." Today our view of happiness tends

to be hedonistic. We want to feel good immediately and tend not to think too far ahead. So we see a night out or a pleasant activity as a route to happiness. This was not the view that the founders had in mind.

The ancient Greeks, however, whom many of our founders looked to on this subject, had a very different perspective on happiness. Aristotle spoke about achieving *eudaimonia*, which is roughly translated into happiness. Eudaimonia is not an emotional state; it is more about being all that you can, fulfilling your potential. The idea is that by living in a way that reaches your full potential you bloom or flourish and so display the best version of you that you can be. This meant striving for “*arête*,” which loosely translated means excellence or virtue. Achieving this required intense striving, or what the Greeks referred to as “agon” and was not something that could be simply provided to someone.

Of course, the individual pursuit of excellence necessarily became a community matter through the family unit and voluntary associations. Puritan Philosopher/Theologian Jonathan Edwards was well known for his assertion that “One Alone can not be Excellent.” Indeed, the notion of “spontaneous order” which many associate strictly with economics, asserted that individuals left free to pursue happiness would naturally realize the public good. Although Adam Smith is now better known for his work on economics entitled “The Wealth of Nations,” he was actually a moral philosopher. His main work at the time was entitled “The Theory of Moral Sentiments,” in which he suggested that humans had a natural moral intuition, or sentiment, which led them to find fulfillment in showing benevolence toward others. Because the notion of morality presupposed that behavior was freely chosen, voluntary persuasion, rather than coercion, was what was needed. Some groups like the Quakers, believed that this, coupled with the “inner light,” was all that was needed. They saw no need for the coercive power of the State and ran the colony of Pennsylvania for a time with virtually no government at all. On the whole though, most early Americans believed that government was at least needed to secure their rights from those unable to keep their illicit passions in check.

Here we arrive at a central issue at stake between those who seek to limit the role of government and those who seek to expand its role to serve the perceived public good. Why do we oppose expanding the role of government to solve the variety social ills?

In order to answer this question, it is important to understand how the founders viewed the essential nature of government. As George Washington put it:

“Government is not reason, it is not eloquence, it is force; like fire, a troublesome servant and a fearful master. Never for a moment should it be left to irresponsible action.”

According to this view, the role of government is to be strictly limited as its essential nature is characterized by force and force was not seen as a legitimate way for free people to interact with one another. The expansion of the role of government was seen as dangerous and a serious threat to our precious freedom. If earlier Americans did not consider it the role of government to provide for our needs and wants, how did they go about providing such things? As Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out in his classic *Democracy in America*:

Americans of all ages, all stations of life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types - religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute. Americans combine to give fetes, found seminaries, build churches, distribute books, and send missionaries to antipodes. Hospitals, prisons, and schools take shape that way. Finally, if they want to proclaim a truth or propagate some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form an association. In every case, at the head of any new undertaking, where in France you would find the government or in England some territorial magnate, in the United States you are sure to find an association.

Not only is an expanded role for government a threat to our liberty, it is detrimental to the health of “Civil Society,” which is characterized by the various voluntary associations that Americans tend to form. Turning to government to address the needs and concerns which are more properly the role of Civil Society crowds out and undermines the voluntary institutions that make up a free society.

Is it any wonder that as the role of government expands, and we are pit one against another in competition for favors from the government, the use of “reason” and “eloquence” is replaced by “force”? The end result is a society that is much less “civil.”

FamilySecurityMatters.org Contributing Editor Robert Maynard is Vermont Project Director of "Freedom Rising", a grass roots organization dedicated to ensuring that Freedom continues to rise in America.