The Courage of Our Contradictions

A new liberalism must reflect not only on our permanent beliefs, but also on many Americans' reservations about them. A response to E.J. Dionne, Jr.

These are perplexing times for American liberals. Last November's euphoria has given way to frustration and even doubt. This was inevitable, to an extent, because governing is always harder than campaigning. Mario Cuomo's dictum that we campaign in poetry but govern in prose applies with special force to a president whose eloquence on the campaign trail so effectively aroused enthusiasm and raised expectations.

But some critics have gone farther, charging that liberalism is undermining itself because, as Alan Wolfe puts it, "all too often, liberal politicians lack the courage of liberalism." This diagnosis leads to a prescription: We must "get liberals to once again believe in liberalism." This is a version of the *12 Angry Men/ Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* theory, prominent to this day in Hollywood—a

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leader willing to confidently deliver an unvarnished liberal message will sweep away all before him. (The remake would star Warren Beatty.)

Reviewing Wolfe's new book *The Future of Liberalism* in these pages, E.J. Dionne rejects the author's shortage-of-courage thesis but focuses on a related phenomenon—namely, liberal ambivalence—about radicalism, populism, social democracy, globalization, individualism, and much else [See "Liberalism Lost and Found," Issue #14]. While it's hard to object in principle to Dionne's suggestion that liberals should "face their own contradictions squarely," it lacks a certain *je ne sais quoi* as a bumper-sticker (except perhaps among former Marxists). More to the point, it's inadequate analytically. Today's liberals face political difficulties not because they're gutless or conflicted but because many of the things they believe (rightly, in my view) go against the grain of beliefs that are deeply entrenched in our political culture.

That is not a reason to abandon liberalism. As Wolfe, Dionne, and Paul Starr have shown, the liberal tradition is responsible for much of what is best in modern America, and it charts the most promising path to future reforms. It is, however, a reason to proceed in full awareness of the obstacles in its path and to acknowledge that along the way we will often have to accept much less than we want. This means that liberals in high places may have to be less full-throated than either Wolfe or Dionne might prefer. But as the late Ted Kennedy so shrewdly recognized, a series of modest victories can add up to major changes.

Last year's electoral sweep, to begin, was a victory for the Democratic Party, but not necessarily for liberalism. Self-described conservatives outnumber liberals by nearly two to one, and the liberal share of the population has risen only marginally, from 19 to 21 percent, during the past decade. And while 72 percent of Republicans consider themselves conservative, only 37 percent of Democrats consider themselves liberal, versus 39 percent moderate and 22 percent conservative. Republicans are ideologically homogeneous; Democrats represent a diverse coalition. If liberals hope to pass major legislation, they must negotiate and compromise with members of their own party whose outlooks differ from their own.

This is a current reality, unlikely to change anytime soon. Other challenges to liberalism have roots deeper in our history. One centers on the role of government. The early American liberalism of the founding era embodied a handful of basic ideas: among them, fear of tyranny and of concentrated power; mistrust of human nature, which needed to be checked and channeled through institutions and rules; and a preference for government that was limited in scope, though not purely laissez-faire by any means.

From this parsimonious beginning, the federal government grew by fits and starts. The Whigs successfully advocated investment in the public goods needed for economic growth, a strategy that arch-Whig Abraham Lincoln continued as president through measures like the Morrill Land-Grant Colleges Act. The post Civil War expansion of industrial corporations created a thrust toward government as a countervailing power that could limit monopolies and impose regulations in the public interest. Three generations after Andrew Jackson strangled the Bank of the United States, repeated financial crises led to the creation of a much more powerful central bank, empowered to curb dangerous market-based instability. A generation after that, an economic crisis that overwhelmed the capacities of individuals, civil society, and state governments led to new national institutions and policies to provide some measure of security against disaster. In the wake of World War II, the overlapping demands of national defense and global leadership produced a large standing army and a new array of security-oriented institutions. The war also sparked demands to move the historic commitment to equal rights from an abstract norm to concrete practice, which involved the national government in a new system of enforcement. And rising public concern over the externalities of economic growth—especially its impact on the economy—led to new national institutions, laws, and regulations.

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Each of these expansions of national power seemed justified, and often compelled, by changing circumstances. In the aggregate, though, the federal government became more expensive and intrusive; it assumed more responsibility that it could easily discharge; and it presumed a level of competence that it often lacked. After the mid-1960s, trust in government declined steadily, reaching an historic low in the month before Barack Obama's election. It has not improved appreciably since.

This is the central conundrum of modern liberal governance: While state power has grown, America's anti-statist public culture has persisted. Our national default setting, from which we deviate only under extreme pressure, is suspicion of state power. Half a century ago, this took the benign form so pithily characterized by political scientists Lloyd Free and Hadley Cantril, that Americans were "ideologically conservative" but "operationally liberal." Today, after policy failures at home and abroad, many American object to larger government, not (only) on ideological grounds, but also because they doubt its competence and integrity.

While the American people accept many liberal aims (including fundamental health reform), they mistrust the means by which liberals typically pursue them. As Obama is discovering, change we can believe in requires a government we can trust, which most Americans don't think we now have.

Few Americans were pleased to see hundreds of billions of dollars flowing to rescue reckless banks, a miscreant insurance company, and auto manufacturers that had been losing market share for decades. The nearly $800 billion allocated to the stimulus package have yet to produce results that most Americans can see for themselves, and arguments that things would have been even worse without it, while clearly correct, haven't gained as much traction as the administration hoped.

Seen together, the steps the federal government has taken over the past year to avert possible economic catastrophe have made the American people worry much more about the budget deficit and our current fiscal trajectory. In turn, these fears have made it even more difficult to pursue affirmative liberal causes like universal health insurance. Despite the President's promises to the contrary, 60 percent of the public, according to a recent poll by the Brookings Institution and WorldPublicOpinion.org, simply doesn't believe that we can achieve coverage for all without raising their own taxes and substantially increasing the deficit. Perhaps that is why a majority fears that government action designed to improve our health care system could end up making things worse. Historically, liberalism has been a philosophy of limited government. Most Americans still believe in limits, even if they can't precisely locate them, and right now they have a vague but strong feeling that government has crossed the line and is dangerously overextended.

Moreover, as more public business is transacted at the national level, policy becomes more complex, opaque, and intangible, making ordinary citizens feel they have less and less control over the political system. In a recent NPR/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health survey probing public attitudes on health reform, for example, 71 percent of respondents said that Congress listens too little to "people like me," and only a third thought that there was *any* group in Washington that "represents your own views on what's best for the country." This sense of diminished influence strengthens the suspicion that remote centers of power are controlling events over the head and out of sight of the people. At the extremes, this yields what Richard Hofstadter so memorably termed the "paranoid style in American politics," of which the summer furor over "death panels" is but the latest manifestation. "None dare call it treason" is a persistent virus in the American body politics, emerging whenever our political immune system has been weakened.

There is another core feature of liberalism that inadvertently feeds populist paranoia: its tendency toward universalism. Liberals are more likely than conservatives to acknowledge the force of international standards, laws, and institutions. While liberals can affirm American exceptionalism, they have difficulty arguing that America should be exempt from the norms that bind other nations. So we are inclined to think—rightly, I believe—that if a particular practice constituted torture when the Japanese did it, it's torture when we do it, and that if it's wrong for other countries to engage in torture, it's wrong for us too. Unfortunately, if surveys are to be believed, a majority of the American people disagree with liberals on this point. And that's the problem: Conservatives are more comfortable than liberals with full-throated nationalism, with the belief that if a policy serves American interests, that's the end of the discussion. At the 1984 Republican convention, the late Jeane Kirkpatrick drew blood when she charged that Democrats "blame America first." This year, conservatives reprised her bravado performance, accusing Obama of embarking on an international "apology tour."

Liberals are patriots, but our patriotism is more complicated than conservatives', and we pay a political price for it. That doesn't mean we're wrong. Like individuals, nations become stronger, better, and more highly regarded when they acknowledge their mistakes. Ronald Reagan understood this when he signed legislation compensating Japanese-Americans for their mass internment during World War II. Few of today's conservatives, however, are as scrupulous, preferring instead to mobilize irritable populist nationalism against anyone who says out loud that our country is usually but not always in the right. Often, they bring a majority of the people with them. But not always. It turns out, for example, that most Americans reject Republicans' medical jingoism. No matter how often opponents of reform insist that we have the best health care system in the world, the people aren't buying it, nor should they.

Our tendency toward universalism is linked to another core feature of liberalism—namely, a regard for reason—that sometimes goes overboard. In international affairs, this can lead us to put too much stock in formalisms and negotiations, to believe that problems are soluble when they're not, and to shy away from the use of force even when it's necessary. At home, the same impulse leads liberal theorists to fetishize deliberation and to delegitimize threats and bargaining, which are essential to successful governance. Wise liberals understand, with James Madison, that while wisdom and virtue do exist, they are always in short supply and always in need of what he termed "auxiliary precautions."

The liberal regard for reason—and its professional expression, expertise—can also shade over into a self-undermining rationalism. You don't have to travel all

the way down Hayek's road to acknowledge centralized power's modest ability to aggregate information in the service of policies whose consequences cannot be anticipated. Liberal governance is stronger when liberal leaders don't claim to control more than they really can.

Similarly, liberalism's embrace of science can shade over into scientism, the belief that science can resolve policy problems on its own. Yes, it's important to face climate change armed with the best analyses and predictions that the scientific community can provide, and it's wrong to use public power to suppress their free expression. But it's no use pretending that science alone can tell us what to do—how much to change and to sacrifice—to avert an increment of the climate change that will occur if we don't change course. That's an economic, political, and moral question about which thoughtful people disagree.

In the same vein, it may well be the case that if we broaden the allowable uses of human embryos, we will eventually be able to address diseases and disabilities for which there's now no cure. But we can't move directly from that premise to the conclusion that government should lift current restrictions. By itself, science cannot adjudicate the moral objections many have raised, and liberal proponents of unfettered research do their cause no good by pretending otherwise.

Contemporary liberals would do well to clarify the moral basis of their creed and think through its political consequences. There are four major contenders for the mantle of the core liberal principle: justice, security, liberty, and equality. Since John Rawls rose to prominence in the early 1970s, liberal academics have been preoccupied with theories of justice. As Wolfe tartly notes, their writings have had little practical impact. In part this is because many academics erect their theories on foundations that most Americans reject. (Rawls's rejection of individual desert and personal responsibility as an element of justice is the classic example.) But the problem goes deeper. Unlike Europe, American public culture has rarely given much weight to distributive questions. In my three decades of off-and-on political engagement, I've seen many liberal intellectuals and politicians appeal to what they regard as the self-evident injustice revealed by income distribution tables; none has succeeded.

Security is a more plausible contestant, because it speaks to deep sentiments and real needs. In times of massive insecurity—economic depression and military threat—individuals look to government for protection against forces they cannot hope to master on their own. Liberals have responded with institutions and policies that have made people's lives more secure and that have become part of the fabric of our national life. Even conservatives acknowledge this; witness their recent reinvention as the guardians of Medicare.

Security is a limited norm, however. Its point is to ward off threats. Taken too far, it can lead citizens and nations into a defensive crouch, fearful of change and the future. Historically, American public culture has been oriented in the opposite direction, open to innovation and hopeful about progress. While declinism is a recurrent academic trope, most Americans believe—and want their leaders to believe—that our best days still lie ahead. And for better or worse, risk-taking is in our blood, perhaps because so many of us are descended from people who abandoned the security of the familiar in the hope of building better lives.

That leaves liberty and opportunity. Wolfe places a version of liberty at the center of liberalism. As he formulates the core liberal principle, "As many people as possible should have as much say as is feasible over the direction their lives will take." There's much to be said in favor of this principle philosophically, and it's a sentiment that certainly resonates in our national experience. What could be more American than casting off restraints and defining a new course for oneself?

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As we descend from abstraction toward particulars, however, difficulties emerge. During the August tumult over health care, a local journalist hailed a lithe young jogger and asked him about the individual mandate. Why should I be forced to buy health insurance?, the jogger replied; I can take care of myself. But self-directed lives often affect the lives of others; private acts can have public consequences. In such cases, liberals believe that government may legitimately act to mitigate those consequences. This simple idea—that what each of us does can have a significant effect on others—is the basis of the liberal response to the jogger: Hey, buddy, if you trip and break your neck, our health care system is going to treat you, and your private savings won't come close to covering it, which means that the rest of us will have to pay for you. Don't you have a responsibility to chip in? (Some liberals claim, in addition, that because "we're all in this together," the young and healthy should be in the pool to help bring costs down for the old and sick. While this moral claim may be valid, it goes well beyond the social externalities argument at the heart of the response to the jogger.)

In any event, this line of argument points to a key ambiguity in the idea of self-direction: It can be understood both individually and collectively. And that's the crux of the argument: While modern liberals contend that collective self-direction provides the frame for, and must often limit, individual self-direction, conservatives see much collective self-direction as an intrusion on the ability

and right of individuals to lead their lives as they see fit. So it's not the concept of self-direction that does the real work; it's all the other claims, moral and empirical, that lead liberals to affirm, and conservatives to doubt, the affirmative role of collective action.

That brings us to opportunity. On July 4, 1861, in his famous War Address to Congress, Abraham Lincoln contended that "this is essentially a people's contest. On the side of the Union it is a struggle for maintaining in the world that form and substance of government whose leading object is to elevate the condition of men—to lift artificial weights from all shoulders; to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all; to afford all an unfettered start and a fair chance in the race of life." It's hard to imagine a more succinct statement of the principle we now call equality of opportunity, or an idea closer to the heart of modern liberalism. There is a direct link between Lincoln's statement and Lyndon Johnson's speech at Howard University, between land-grant colleges and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

That is not to say that equal opportunity is simple, either in theory or in practice. For example, modern social science supports what philosophers since Plato have argued: The family is a major source of unequal opportunity. Some children arrive at kindergarten with a large vocabulary and ready to learn, while others don't, and we could neutralize these effects only by intruding on family autonomy in ways that no liberal society should consider. That is not to say that liberals are helpless—there's nothing to prevent us from working to make pre-K education available and affordable for the parents of every three- and four-year-old. And the broader point remains: It is by thinking clearly about what it will take to truly offer everyone an "unfettered start and a fair chance" that contemporary liberals can craft a more persuasive agenda for public policy and a more balanced understanding of what, in the end, individuals and families must do for themselves.

Facing up to our contradictions won't get us where we need to go, and neither will announcing our convictions more firmly. Instead, I suggest, we must shape a twenty-first-century agenda for opportunity at home and security abroad that takes into account not only our permanent beliefs, but also many Americans' enduring reservations about them. The people are telling us to take these reservations seriously, and we should listen.

As we do, we needn't be, or feel, defensive. Greater opportunity, more widely available, does not necessarily imply a government that overreaches. International policies carried out with due respect for international norms do not necessarily diminish our security. If we are attentive and supple, we can maintain both our principles and the democratic support we need to realize them. D