

complete realist, Eisenhower won re-election in a landslide and, with Franklin Roosevelt and Reagan, another prudent realist, is among the top ten presidents.

That brings us to George W. Bush, the most ideological president in American history. He thinks in abstractions and acts on them. No president stands at a greater remove from Burke's critique of ideology. His foreign policy—the march of democracy—is immune to fact and, notably in Iraq, to a Burkean sense of history. In economics (supply-side dogma, calamitous debt), in science (Intelligent Design), in his opposition to stem-cell research and therapy, Bush has been a brass-bound ideologue. On stem-cell research, Bush formulates his opposition this way: "It's wrong to destroy life in order to save life." His first use of the word "life" refers to a few insensate cells, his second to an actual sick human being. His formulation is self-refuting. As an exercise in the use of the "moral imagination"—a term coined by Burke—let us cut through verbiage to concrete fact: if you had a child with Type I diabetes, a devastating disease, and I said I had a few cells that would cure her, would you turn this offer down? The question answers itself. It also answers Bush.

The common denominator of successful presidents, liberal or conservative, has been that they were realists. Because Bush is an ideologue remote from fact, he has failed comprehensively and surely is the worst president in American history—indeed, in the damage he has caused to the nation, without a rival in the race for the bottom. Because Bush is generally called a conservative, he will have poisoned the term for decades to come. ■

**JEFFREY HART** is a senior editor of *National Review* and author, most recently, of *The Making of the American Conservative Mind*.

---

**Nicholas von Hoffman** The words "liberal" and "conservative" may be meaningless to anyone given to precise definition, but they remain useful for fisticuffs, serving as verbal mud pies in political disputes.

True, calling someone a conservative is not the same bone-crusher as calling someone a liberal. The latter epithet is so damaging that people who have been scored off as fuzzy, liberal caterpillars have been known to hump off under a leaf in hopes of re-emerging as brilliantly attractive, progressive butterflies.

But even though the progressive label may afford a degree of cover, there is something wishy-washy about the word. A progressive is a blanched liberal, and those who adopt the name rarely fool anyone. Of late the ruse has been so uncon-

vincing that professional politicians are reconciling themselves to donning the hair shirt of liberalism again.

There is no conservative counterpart to the liberal who blushes and fidgets when the name is applied to him. Conservatives take pride in the appellation as they fight abortion, flag burning, and the love that once dared not say its name but now shouts it from the rooftops. Only lately have they begun to encounter occasions when it's an embarrassment. The longer George W. Bush and his confederates remain in office the more frequently such instances occur.

Past that, the liberal-conservative polarity has disappeared. The guiding principles that distinguished the two once great schools of thought are not doing much guiding. When a faction inside the American Civil Liberties Union is evidently trying to gag an opposing faction from publicly expressing dissent, we are wading around in a swamp.

Bipolar politics is our tradition, but the old poles have lost their magnetism and, for the moment, reconstituting them seems impossible. What would a new conservatism or new liberalism look like? What principles would it steer by? And if not two parties, how about three or four or ten? A non-starter. Our laws and political institutions are so stoutly designed for bipolar politics that multi-polarity does not have a chance. Even if it did, in a country that is having trouble scraping together two political parties founded on something other than nonsense, a multi-party system looks less than promising. There are days when it seems we don't have enough decent political ideas to stock even one.

In lieu of political parties based on stately essays by the great thinkers of the past, we can continue with what we have—which is crisis politics. Whoever comes up with the most frightening crisis wins. Of late it has been the Republicans, whether conservative or not, who have delivered the knockout punches. Dead babies, dirty bombs, men exchanging wedding bands with other men, toppling skyscrapers, evil Arabs, girl bishops—they've swept the Democrats, whether liberal or not, out of contention. Not that the D's don't have hopes. It has been said that the Democrats are but one Katrina away from seizing power.

None of the above has much to do with any conservative-liberal continuum. It has to do with how one political gang can jump on what's happening at the moment and cash in on it. But then polarities of principle, the grand abstractions that are so hard to apply, have seldom dominated our government policy. If it were otherwise, the Concord Coalition would not be a flyspeck of a group, unknown outside the small world of policy wonkery.

So what does the future hold? Many symposia, that much is certain. What else? Many ad hoc alliances between different parts of the busted-up ideological centers of the now defunct Right-Left cores. A recent example of such was the coalition of libertarians, conservatives, and lefties renting

the Daughters of the American Revolution Hall on Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday to hear Al Gore thunder on the topic of civil rights and civil liberties.

More broadly, the terms conservative and liberal will continue to be used and misused as we, who doubt we are a part of either, stumble in the swamp, looking for a solid place to put our feet. ■

**NICHOLAS VON HOFFMAN** *is a former columnist for the Washington Post and is the author, most recently, of A Devil's Dictionary of Business.*

---

**James Kurth** It certainly now seems that the terms “liberal” and “conservative” fit the realities of American politics very poorly. The existence of such new, but also confusing, terms as “neoliberal” and especially “neoconservative” is one obvious illustration. However, we will argue that some version of this confusion has long characterized American politics, indeed is the essence of American politics, and that liberal and conservative still remain the most useful terms we are likely to have, now and in the future.

Suppose that one had to invent, to build from the ground up, new labels to fit the actual, contemporary, major divisions within American politics. We would first start with a specification of just what those divisions are. To begin with, there is the great divide over social, cultural, or moral issues (as in “the culture war” and “moral values”). Here there is a clear division between those Americans whose priority is the free choice and expression of the individual and those who prefer to subordinate this individual freedom to religious (specifically, biblical) teachings or traditional norms. The first tendency especially reveres the First Amendment of the Constitution; the second tendency especially reveres the Ten Commandments of the Bible. In addition, the first tendency admires the values now found among the political and cultural elites of other Western democracies (which they call “universal human rights”); the second tendency is attached to distinctly American values (American exceptionalism). Most political analysts, not only in the media but also in academia, are perfectly comfortable with applying the terms liberal and conservative respectively to these two tendencies (as in “social” or “cultural liberals” and “social” or “cultural conservatives”).

Second, there is the great and long-standing divide over security issues. Here there is a clear division between those Americans whose priority is individual liberty, particularly the freedom of movement and association of individuals and also of members of minority communities (civil liberties and civil rights) and those whose priority is national security,

who prefer to constrain the movement and associations of some individuals (and of some minorities), if that would enhance the security of the nation (and of the majority) as a whole. Again, most political analysts, not only in the media but also in academia, are perfectly comfortable with applying the terms liberal and conservative respectively to these two tendencies.

Thus far, our terminological construction project has been rather simple. Liberals are those Americans who prioritize individual freedom over anything else; conservatives are those who are willing to subordinate this to traditional values or community interests, e.g., a religion or the nation. However, in America confusion has always arisen when we turn our attention to economic issues.

This adds a third great, and very long-standing, divide in American politics. Here there is a clear division between those Americans whose priority is the freedom of individual entrepreneurs or corporate enterprises (“free enterprise,” “the free market”) and those who prefer to subordinate this individual freedom to government regulation and limitation. Today, and for many years, most political analysts have applied the term conservative to the first tendency and liberal to the second (as in “economic” or “fiscal conservatives” and “economic” or “fiscal liberals”).

We now can see why in America the terms liberal and conservative have often been confusing and awkward. The liberals generally favor individual expression on the social and security issues but government regulation on the economic ones. Conversely, the conservatives generally favor restraining individual expression by government regulation (or preferably by self-restraint informed by religious teachings or by traditional and patriotic values) on the social and security issues but free enterprise on the economic ones.

**“Liberals generally favor individual expression on the social and security issues but government regulation on the economic ones.”**

Social conservatives, security conservatives, and economic conservatives all tend to support the Republican Party. But their different priorities over the freedom of the individual make for a great deal of tensions, indeed divisions, within the party itself. Most obviously, richer, business (“country-club”) Republicans generally promote economic conservatism and downplay (or even privately despise) social conservatism. Conversely, poorer, employee (“Main Street”) Republicans generally prioritize social conservatism and downplay economic conservatism. The first tendency provides the campaign dollars for the Republicans;