



The Permissive Right

by Herbert London

The media have discovered a new political darling: William Weld, the governor of Massachusetts. Here is the quintessential hero for the Deficit-Cutting Era: a fiscal conservative and a social liberal. The *Wall Street Journal*, relying on economic data, described him as the most effective governor in the country. *New York Times* editors have been no less effusive in their praise. From all that has been written, he may be perceived as Moses leading the Republican Party to the promised land on Pennsylvania Avenue and rewriting the political Talmud to say markets work, but social issues should be kept in the bedroom.

Weld is not alone. There are libertarians, who believe the government should restrict its activity to defense matters. There are neoconservatives like Irving Kristol, who claim the cultural wars are over and our side lost. There is even William F. Buckley, who argues that the abortion question should be removed from politics.

Why has no one pointed out that fiscal conservatism and social liberalism are incompatible? If it isn't possible for most individuals to sustain a high standard of living and control expenditures while holding libertine attitudes about sex, morality, and discipline, why should it be possible for societies? When poor women have children out of wedlock, an enormous burden gets placed on society in the form of remedial education, high crime rates, drug abuse, and the full range of aberrant behavior. As a consequence of illegitimacy, government expenditures will inevitably increase. When governors do not criticize

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this behavior or dismantle the bureaucracy that enables it to occur, all their fiscal proposals ultimately come to nought.

Similarly, the economy is affected by family breakdown and social anomie. As Schumpeter, Weber, and Daniel Bell pointed out, capitalism depends on the requisites of moral rectitude. If employees aren't punctual, use drugs, and engage in anti-social acts, then performance on the job will be adversely affected. Theoretically, in a free-market environment such problems would be addressed by firing the miscreants. But, in fact, welfare-state capitalism accommodates the very behavior that militates against employee output. Capitalism can produce wealth and wealth can produce social permissiveness, which in turn can undermine the behavioral requisites on



which capitalism depends. This is a classic case of the cultural contradictions of capitalism.

When urban residents react against high crime rates and begin to assume that their private property is only temporarily in their possession, businesses will leave the city, jobs will flee as well, and the tax base will erode. Here is the New York-Los Angeles scenario.

It is predictable for Democrats to concentrate on the economy ("... Stupid!") during a downturn. But Republicans are seemingly jumping on this bandwagon and concentrating on the economy to the virtual exclusion of social issues. The keep-these-matters-in-the-bedroom wing of the party is in the ascendancy. What these advocates neglect to point out is that government is promoting a social agenda through welfare policy, the schools' curricula, and arts subsidies that have taken social issues from the bedroom to the streets. The very people who would "keep these matters in the bedroom" covertly promote a social agenda through the Children of the Rainbow curriculum, bias bills designed to appease homosexual activists, subsidies for artists which are often employed for a radical agenda, condom distribution in the schools, and multicultural textbooks.

Lest I create the impression that I see Weld as a Republican Ted Kennedy, let me emphasize that I think he was both right and courageous in leading the charge for spending restraints and tax cuts in Massachusetts. But I'm convinced that all his reforms won't amount to a hill of beans in a welfare environment that keeps expanding its client base.

Since the 1960s, state and federal governments have spent more than \$3 trillion attempting to address social problems in inner cities with little if anything to show for it. In fact, latitudinarian social behavior promoted and abetted by social liberals in both parties has led inexorably to an ever growing government expense to address the problems permissiveness has caused to flourish. For example, liberals were appalled when Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan said the effect of illegitimacy in the black community would undermine the family by causing young women to be married

to government instead of husbands. History, of course, has proved him right. Yet the social liberals generally do not connect his warning with the enormous public expense, now in the multi-billions, to sustain these children and deal with the crime they disproportionately commit.

It is astonishing that anyone can ignore the relationship between the tax burden and permissive social attitudes, but myopia is a widespread affliction. It can certainly be demonstrated that sex education programs and condom distribution have not decreased sexual promiscuity and illegitimacy, but have added to the cost of education. Some educators—and I agree with them—contend that these courses and condom programs actually increase promiscuity and illegitimacy and add hidden costs to the society. It can be demonstrated that, in this era of AIDs, buggery and hypodermic drug use come with risks, not only for consenting adults exercising their free will, but for the rest of us who have observed high insurance costs, hospital expenses, and tax rates. And there may be some linkage—usually denied by rigid avatars of the First Amendment—that malicious rock lyrics and perverse film and television scripts can influence young minds into malicious and perverse acts for which the rest of society pays.

Clearly an indeterminate point could be reached at which the social costs of permissiveness require government intervention, although in most instances I prefer family guidance to the heavy hand of government. People should be discouraged from smoking because the costs to society are high, but that discouragement can often come in forms other than legislation. Similarly, liberal lawmakers sponsor mandatory helmet laws for motorcyclists, but I would argue that this problem should be addressed with insurance rates high enough to discourage such behavior.

At the moment John and Mary Q. Public are bewildered by behavioral permissiveness and upset by high insurance rates designed to discourage irresponsible behavior. But they haven't put the two together. If people were to think about this linkage, it wouldn't take much persuasion to convince them that the phrase fiscal-conservative-and-social-liberal is oxymoronic. Adopting a live-and-let-live view of society will harm the

economy and constrain the application of fiscally conservative policies.

George Bernard Shaw once said, "Taking from Peter to pay Paul always meets with the approval of Paul." Think of Paul as government and Peter as the taxpayer. Governments always have a reason for high taxes. The fiscal conservative and social liberal, however, says we can have low taxes and a permissive social environment. But low taxes and low morals usually lead to high taxes and low morals. A libertine who accepts illegitimacy will at some point have to assume fiscal responsibility for feral children who commit much of the crime and force society to bear an unwanted financial burden. As graffiti on a subway wall noted: "If you lead the high life, someone will pay for you to be a low life."

Teaching the public to appreciate a linkage between tax policy and social policy shouldn't be hard. President Clinton is likely to be an unwitting ally in this educational process. He will raise taxes to address social problems which will not be reduced or solved with additional expenditures. The public is waking up to the fact that urban streets aren't safe despite increases in spending on police protection. Educational expenditures grow at a rate twice that of inflation and still those students reading at grade level goes down as a percentage of the whole and the number of students scoring above 1200 on the SATs (verbal and math scores combined) goes down relatively and absolutely year after year.

The culture war is not over. Conservatives have yet to fire a shot. Perhaps in the not-too-distant future a fusillade will be heard from them. Until then, one should be wary of fiscal conservatives and social liberals applauded by the *New York Times*. Their agenda is not all it seems. I'm not telling Jack Kemp and Bill Bennett who card-carrying members of their new group Empower America should be, but when Bill Weld is considered a charter member, it gives me pause. If the Welds in the Republican Party have their way, Empower America will resemble Enervate America, and all discussion of fiscal conservatism may have to be modified to incorporate a liberal social agenda. Surely there is a lesson here for Republicans who want to rebuild their party. □

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Keep On Truckin'

by Terry Eastland

According to consumer activists and plaintiffs trial lawyers, GM C/K pickup trucks have long tended to catch fire in side-impact collisions. So NBC News's "Dateline NBC" decided to "investigate." "Waiting To Explode?" was the title of its infamous 15-minute "news feature" that ran last November 17. In what correspondent Michelle Gillen described as an "unscientific demonstration" conducted by "outside experts" in a field near Indianapolis, Indiana, a car was shown smashing into the side of a 1977 GM truck. Immediately there was fire, the flames licking up between the truck and the car. Oh, my! Another bad vehicle, indeed a death-mobile. Or so the viewer might have thought.

But GM thought otherwise. In a two-hour press conference on February 8, the auto maker set forth its findings and announced it was filing a defamation lawsuit against the network. NBC President Michael Gartner publicly defended the segment as "fair and accurate" and accused GM of trying to divert attention from its problem trucks. But the very next day, "Dateline" co-anchors Stone Phillips and Jane Pauley came on to read one of the most remarkable apologies in the history of American journalism. Talk about transforming a story: Not GM's trucks but NBC's shoddy journalism now dominated the news. Soon enough, Gartner resigned in disgrace and the network is now struggling to recover whatever is left of its reputation.

"Dateline NBC" featured two

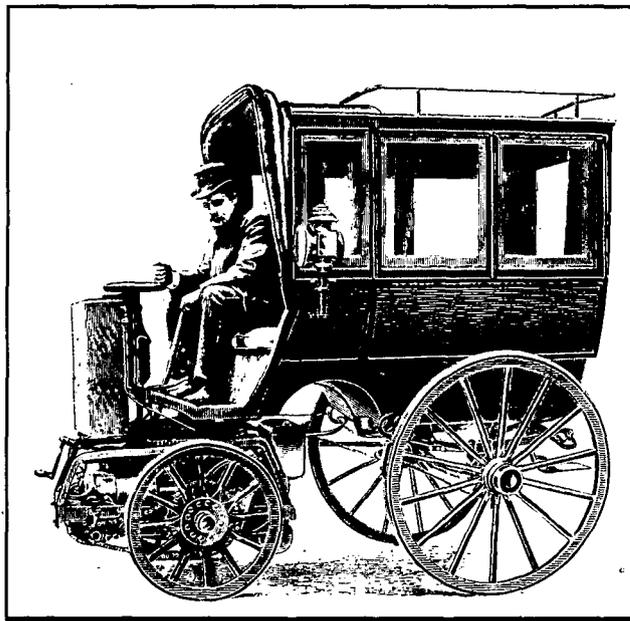
side-impact collisions. NBC's contractor for the demos had strapped under the trucks incendiary devices (detonated by remote control) to guarantee a fire once gasoline spewed from the gas tank. (Or that's how it was supposed to work; the second collision caused no fire.) But Michelle Gillen didn't tell viewers about this newfangled accessory (available only on models serviced by NBC), nor did she report that the gas cap for the truck in the crash that resulted in fire was the wrong cap for the truck's filler tube and that the tank itself was filled to overflowing—conditions that helped the cap come off and the gas to spill out when the crash occurred.

Gillen did say: "At impact, a small hole was punctured in the tank" and the crash "forced gasoline to spew from the fuel cap." The first statement was false, the second so incomplete as to be false. In its apology, NBC admitted as much and said the show should have informed viewers about the incendiary devices, the

use of which "was a bad idea from start to finish." "This unscientific demonstration," the apology continued, "was not representative of an actual side-impact collision." And: "We have . . . concluded that unscientific demonstrations should have no place in hard news stories at NBC. That's our new policy."

While NBC's apology ended the lawsuit, it was in fact incomplete. The 56 seconds of "unscientific demonstrations" were merely the most sensational part of the 15-minute segment, but hardly the only defective moments. Alas, NBC is willing to defend all but those 56 seconds, for the apology also announced: "We believe we presented in the balance of the segment all sides of the controversy over the safety of the GM trucks."

Let's review the segment from the top. Stone Phillips advises that certain pickup trucks made by GM may not be as "rough and rugged" as people think. They may have "a fatal flaw—a gas tank in the wrong place." "Top safety experts" attribute more than 300 deaths to this defect. Jane Pauley chimes in to say there are now "serious questions whether the GM pickups should be recalled." GM denies the trucks have any such "fatal flaw," she says, introducing the segment with this imperative: "Watch Michelle Gillen's investigation and you decide." Observe that the "top safety experts" are pitted against an auto manufacturer defendant, and that you the viewer are invited to sit as juror, with NBC acting as district attorney. Here is a classic case of what Lehigh University's Carole Gorney terms "litigation journalism."



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