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Freedom and 9/11

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One of the major consequences of 9/11 has been its dreadful impact on the

nation's conception and experience of freedom, its core secular value. Nearly all Americans consider themselves to be very free regardless of class and ethnicity, although what exactly this means, and how it is experienced, has always been strongly contested.

The terrorist attacks on 9/11 severely exacerbated these differences and contradictions, and have provided the opportunity for the greatest threats to civil liberties since the McCarthy era, threats perversely carried out, as in that era, in the name of freedom itself. To understand these effects one must first recall the pre-9/11 complexities of freedom in America.

Since the nation's founding, two broad traditions of freedom have competed for hegemony: a more public and increasingly liberal progressive tradition, and a conservative one that has become more and more privatized. Liberals value negative freedoms such as habeas corpus and protections of free speech, but give equal weight to the positive freedoms that enhance people's capacity to achieve basic securities without which formal liberties are largely meaningless. The liberal tradition also sees democracy not in competition with but as an integral component of freedom, and as a bulwark of both negative and positive freedoms—the legislative triumphs of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and the historic civil rights legislative triumphs of 1964 and 1965 being its greatest moments. I call these "public liberties" because they involve not simply the regulation of egoistic interpersonal relations, but the guarantee of equal access to the nation's public powers, laws, patrimony, and all other rights and obligations of citizenship, as well as the legal requirement of government at all levels to protect the interests of minorities in responding to the will of the majority.

From early after the founding of the nation, however, conservatives came to view democracy with suspicion, a potential threat to “true freedom.” Limited government became the mantra of American conservatism and this has intensified with each wave of liberal control of the legislative arm of government. Conservatives have largely won the ideological battle over both the ownership and meaning of freedom. Over the decades, freedom was not only appropriated as a largely conservative preoccupation, but also semantically uncoupled from democracy—indeed, seen to exist in opposition to it. Freedom has been privatized and has come to be viewed as a highly individualized personal value regarding oneself and one’s unmediated relationships with others—being left alone to do what one wants; having choices; securing one’s property; being independent; being autonomous; and, in the most extreme form of personalization, being inwardly liberated from sin and other inner constraints. So thorough has been the conservative victory that even among people who do not view democracy as a threat, who indeed may even regard it as necessary and desirable, voting and other forms of political participation are not viewed as expressions of freedom. This was perhaps the most startling finding from research into Americans’ views of freedom that I have conducted over the past decade.

Two critical features of the conservatives’ tradition of freedom require emphasis. One is the fact that their most important freedom is, in spite of the negative slant of their rhetoric, essentially a positive one: the protection of property and all the powers that come with it. The second is that, contrary to common belief, what most conservatives truly fear is not strong government but strong *democratic* government, and what they truly desire is not limited government, rhetoric notwithstanding, but limited *democracy*. This is clear in foreign affairs, where conservatives have favored vast military forces not only to protect but to project power and enhance economic interests.

Domestically, conservative governments have often sought an imperial presidency and have recklessly used the state to intervene in the personal lives of citizens who deviate from conservative cultural norms or, in the case of the Jim Crow South, to preserve a racist social hierarchy. The commonly made claim that there is a fateful split between capitalistic libertarians whose main preoccupation is the protection of property rights (and the broader capitalistic system) and cultural conservatives who are preoccupied with the use of the state to impose moral codes on the population is a misleading political cliché. With the exception of the small and mostly marginal group of genuine libertarians, this contradiction is overdrawn. As long as property rights are protected and the democratic propensity to tax the wealthy reined in, most conservatives are quite prepared to use the power of the state to enhance

conservative cultural norms. American conservative leaders have long known what the Chinese leadership under Deng Xiaoping discovered 33 years ago: For capitalism, the only freedom that matters is the protection of property rights, beyond which the system is utterly neutral in its cultural and political bedfellowship. With all this in mind, we can now better understand the fallout from 9/11. The assault directly strengthened the hands of those who had long sought a more imperial and powerful presidency. And it was, of course, the justification for the calamitous waging of war on Iraq. It is striking that when the cause of war turned out to be fictitious, the concocted rationale became the need to protect and spread freedom abroad. To most foreigners and all liberal-minded Americans, this seemed like sheer cynicism; the astonishing thing, however, is that the Bush Administration was able to persuade a substantial portion of Americans to buy into the view that freedom could be spread at the point of a gun, even if it meant the devastation of a country.

Equally alarming was the fact that the attack allowed the demand for greater national security to be used as cover for the assault on a wide range of those civil liberties disdained by conservatives—the wiretapping, the surveillance, the extra-judicial detentions and tribunals, and so on. But what was most distressing in all this was the passivity of the general public toward these developments, a point emphasized by Richard C. Leone, president of the progressive Century Foundation, who bemoaned the absence of public deliberation in what he called “the Quiet Republic.” Especially troubling were polls showing 60 percent of Americans agreeing that the government’s power to keep wartime secrets was more important than the freedom of the press—made all the more disturbing because the war on terror was considered endless by the government.

What accounts for “the Quiet Republic”? My answer is the success of conservatives in promoting their version of privatized freedom, conjoined to a powerful plutocratic state with a severely limited and corrupted democracy. Because so many Americans no longer view public liberties as of a piece with their exercise of private liberty, and because they imagine that the latter is in no way threatened, they showed little concern for the tragedy that unfolded in the public culture of liberty. It is this that explains the seeming paradox that the President who came closest to undermining civil liberties in America was the one who most frequently intoned and justified his actions in the name of freedom. Bush and his advisers, with their greater understanding of the conservative success in privatizing the American view of freedom, knew that what may have seemed like a gross contradiction between rhetoric and practice to liberals would be of little concern to an electorate with such a

view of freedom coupled with a deep concern about security. Consistent with the privatized view of freedom, his most consoling advice to the nation soon after the attack was to show the terrorists that Americans were still free by returning to that most beloved exercise of privatized freedom: shopping.

The election of Barack Obama has not fundamentally altered these developments. His election was the result of the fortuitous combination of his remarkable political talents and the economic disaster brought on by the destructive policies of the Bush Administration. However, we should note that while Obama has checked the worst abuses of the Bush Administration against civil liberties, he has been disappointingly cautious in his reinvigoration of the liberal tradition of freedom: The Patriot Act still stands and, more alarmingly, his Administration has turned out to be even less transparent than that of his predecessor. Finally, the rise and success of the freedom-wailing Tea Party movement—with its stranglehold on the resurgent Republican Party whose leadership it has forced to pledge never to raise taxes, its call for “limited government” while promoting the intrusion of government into the moral lives of citizens, and the aid of a Supreme Court committed to the most shameless legal enabling of the plutocratic undoing of democracy—forcefully demonstrates that the conservative tradition of privatized freedom, given new life by the tragedy of 9/11, remains the dominant ideological force in America. **D**