

THE FEAR OF THE LIBERALS

BY COREY ROBIN

It is the fourth anniversary of September 11, and Americans are getting restless about the war in Iraq. Republicans are challenging the President, activists and bloggers are pressing the Democrats and liberal hawks are reconsidering their support for the war. Everyone, it seems, is asking questions.

Two questions, however, have not been asked, perhaps because they might actually help us move beyond where we are and where we've been. First, how is it that few liberals and no leftists in 1968 believed that Lyndon Johnson, arguably the most progressive President in American history, would or could airlift democracy to Vietnam, while many liberals and not a few leftists in 2003 believed the most reactionary President since William McKinley could and would export democracy to Iraq?

Second, why did certain liberals who opposed the war in Iraq refuse to march against it? The reason they gave was that left-wing groups like ANSWER, which helped organize the anti-war rallies, failed to denounce Saddam's regime. Yet many of those who could not abide an alliance with ANSWER endorsed the war in Afghanistan—even though it was waged by a government that recently invaded three Caribbean countries, funded dirty wars in Latin America and backed the government of Guatemala, the only regime in the Western Hemisphere condemned by a UN-sponsored truth commission for committing acts of genocide. Politics, of course, often entails an unhappy choice of associations. But if the deeds of the U.S. government need not stop liberals from supporting the war in Afghanistan, why should the words—words, mind you, not deeds—of leftists deprive the antiwar movement of these very same liberals' support.

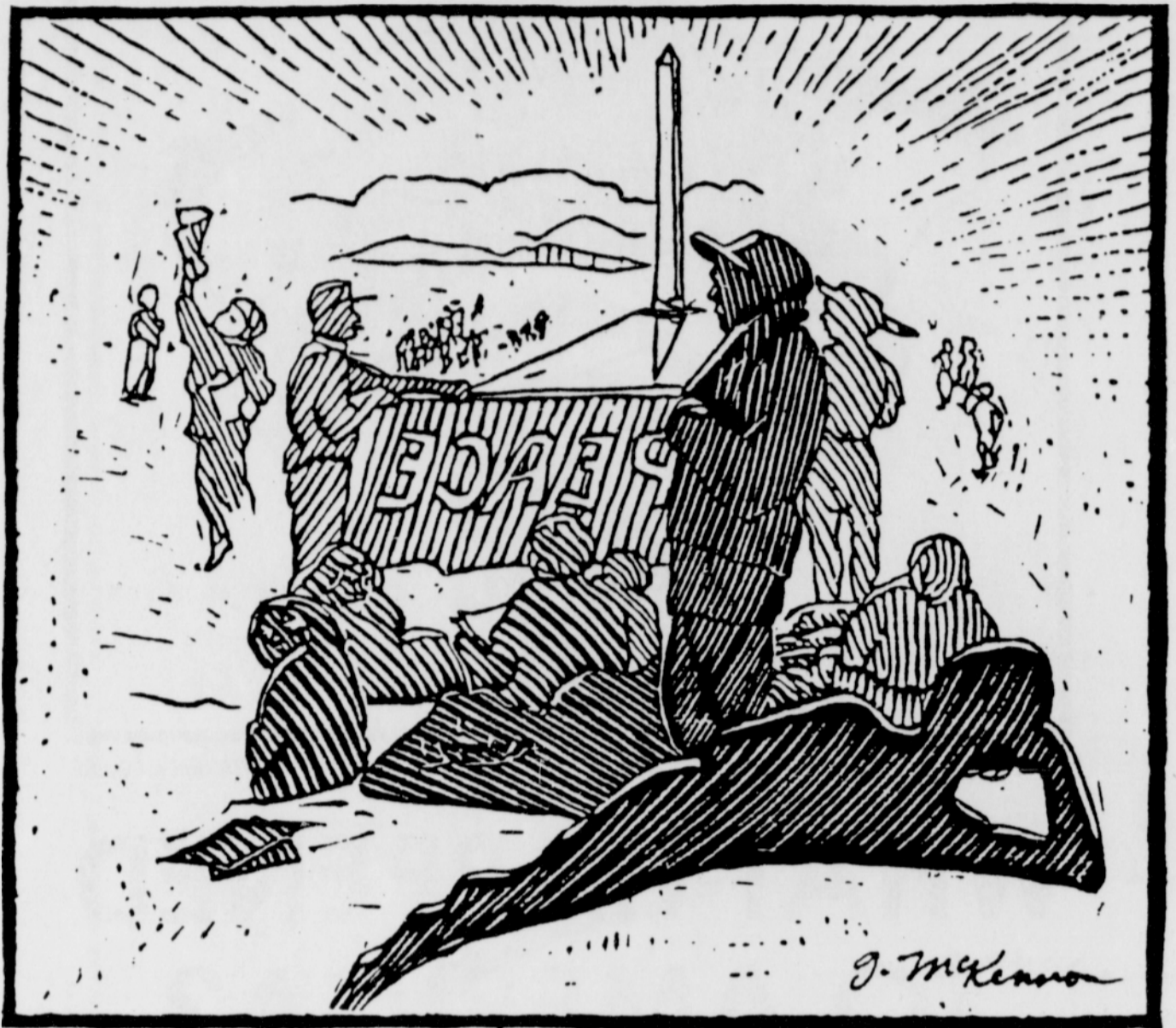
Both questions register a fundamental shift among liberals, and on the left, since the 1960s: from skepticism of faith in U.S. power, and from faith in to skepticism of popular movements. During the Vietnam era, liberals and leftists believed not only in social justice but also in mass protest. Whether the cause was democracy at home or liberation abroad, men and women afflicted by oppression had to organize themselves for freedom. Yes, some of yesterday's activists were blind to coercion within these movements, and others joined elite cadres bombing their way to liberation. Still, the animating faith of the 1960s was in the democratic capacities of ordinary men and women, making it difficult for liberals and leftists to believe in conquering armies from abroad or shock troops from on high.

Many liberals, and some leftists, no longer hold these views. Their faith is guided not by the light of justice but by the darkness of evil: by the tyranny of dictators, the genocide of ethnic cleansers and the terrorism of Islamist radicals. Despite their differences—some of these liberals and leftists support the war in Iraq, others do not; some are partial to popular movements, particularly those opposing anti-American governments, while others favor constitutional regimes, particularly those supporting the United States—their is a liberalism, as the late Harvard scholar Judith Shklar put it in a pioneering essay in 1989, that seeks to ward off the "summum malum" (worst evil) rather than install a "summum bonum" (highest good). Reversing Augustine's dictum that there is no such thing as evil—evil being only the absence of good—today's liberal believes there is only evil and progress is measured by the distance we put between ourselves and that evil.

Hostility to popular protest and indulgence of American power follow naturally from this position. Mass movements, liberals claim, are blind to evil or apologize for it. Sometimes they actively court it. In their reckless pursuit of utopia, they march men and women to the gulag or into shooting galleries of terrorism and civil war. Only a politics of restraint can shield us from the temptations of violence. While such a philosophy would seem to militate against George W. Bush's empire, many liberals have concluded that evil in the world is so titanic that only U.S. power can deliver us from it.

Straddling minimalism at home and maximalism abroad, many of today's liberals are inspired by fear. This "liberalism of fear," as Shklar called it, is not to be confused with the terror Americans felt after 9/11 or with Democratic timidity in the face of Republican success. No, today's liberal believes in fear as an idea—that it inflicts such suffering on men and women that we can assess governments by the degree to which they minimize it. Fear is the gold standard, the universal measure, of liberal morality: Whatever rouses fear is bad, whatever diminishes it is less bad. In the words of Michael Ignatieff, liberalism "rests less on hope than on fear, less on optimism about the human capacity for good than on dread of the human capacity for evil, less on a vision of man as maker of his history than of man the wolf toward his own kind."

Though leftists in the 1960s certainly spoke of fear, they viewed it not as a foundation but as an obstacle, a hindrance in the struggle for freedom and equality. Whites resisted civil rights, James Baldwin observed, because they were possessed by a "sleeping terror" of ceding status and privilege to blacks. Blacks, in turn, were like "the Jews in Egypt, who really wished to get to the Promised Land but were afraid of the rigors of the journey." The goal was to eliminate or overcome fear, to take one step closer to the Promised Land. This required not only courage but also an ideologically grounded hope for progress. Without an answering vision of social justice, no one would make the journey.



GAYLE McKENNON ('GATHERING FOR THE MARCH')

Many contemporary liberals have given up that hope, turning what a previous generation saw as an impediment into a path. Fear is no longer an obstacle but a crutch, a negative truth from which liberalism derives its confidence and strength. "What liberalism requires," according to Shklar, "is the possibility of making the evil of cruelty and fear the basic norm of its political practices and prescriptions." Liberal values like the rule of law and democracy obtain their worth not from reason or rights—which many liberals no longer believe in as foundational principles—but from the cruelty and fear illiberal states and movements routinely inflict upon helpless men and women.

Today's liberals are attracted to fear for many reasons, including revulsion at the crimes of the last century and the miserable state of the post-colonial world. But one of the main reasons is their belief that fear possesses an easy intelligibility. Fear requires no deep philosophy, no leap of reason, to establish its evil: Everyone knows what it is and that it is bad. "Because the fear of systematic cruelty is so universal," Shklar wrote, "moral claims based on its prohibition have an immediate appeal and can gain recognition without much argument." Once liberals realize that they are "more afraid of being cruel"—and of others being cruel—"than of anything else," Richard Rorty has argued, they need not worry about the grounds of their beliefs.

How did a philosophy so averse to utopia and violence get hitched to the American empire? I don't just mean here the war in Iraq, about which liberals disagreed, but the larger project of using the American military to spread democracy and human rights. How did liberals, who have spent the better part of three decades attacking left-wing adventurism, wind up supporting the greatest adventure of our time?

The answer is that liberals need fear: to justify their principles, to warn us of what happens when liberalism is abandoned. And so they are driven abroad to confront the tyrannies that make life miserable elsewhere in order to derive confidence in their own, admittedly imperfect but infinitely better regimes. A souped-up version of Churchill's adage that democracy is the worst possible government except for all the others, the liberalism of fear sends writers and fighters to foreign lands in search of themselves and their beleaguered faith. In the words of Ignatieff:

"When policy [in the Balkans] was driven by moral motives, it was often driven by narcissism. We intervened not only to save others, but to save ourselves, or rather an image of ourselves as defenders of universal decencies. We wanted to show that West the 'meant' something. This imaginary West, this narcissistic image of ourselves, we believed was incarnated in the myth of a multiethnic, multiconfessional Bosnia."

The moral exhilaration of which Ignatieff speaks is closely linked to the revival of an activism discredited since the '60s—an activism, ironically, liberals helped to defeat but now miss and mourn. The military incursions in Bosnia, Ignatieff notes, were a "theater of displacement, in which political energies that might otherwise have been expended at defending multiethnic society at home were directed instead at defending mythic multiculturalism far away. Bosnia became the latest *bel espoir* of a generation that had tried ecology, socialism and civil rights only to watch all these lose their romantic momentum."

Bosnia was certainly not the first time that liberals looked to a benighted regime abroad in order to compensate for the stalled pace of domestic advance. In 1792 France's Girondins sensed that their revolution was in peril. Beholding long-suffering peoples to the east, they decided to export progress and promptly declared war on... Austria. And it was Robespierre, so often denounced as a utopian scourge, who issued this prescient warning to his distracted comrades: "No one loves armed missionaries."

Nor was Bosnia the last time. Since 9/11 liberal hawks—and their fellow fliers on the left—have turned the rest of the world into a theater of social experiment and political reform, endorsing foreign expeditions in the name of an enlightenment they can no longer pursue at home. They have opted for a detoured radicalism, which, like all detours, paves a convenient path to an obstructed destination: yesterday Afghanistan, today Iraq, tomorrow ourselves. Though the peregrinations of Christopher Hitchens are by now familiar, his confession after 9/11 reveals how easily internationalism can slide into narcissism, the most provincial spirit of all:

On that day I shared the general register of feeling, from disgust to rage, but was also aware of something that would not quite disclose itself. And to my surprise (and pleasure), it was exhilaration... here was a direct, unmistakable confrontation between everything I loved and everything I hated. On one side, the ethics of the multicultural, the secular, the skeptical, and the cosmopolitan... On the other, the arid monochrome of dull and vicious theocratic fascism. I am prepared for this war to go on for a very long time. I will never become tired of waging it, because it is a fight over essentials. And because it is so interesting.

More recently, Paul Berman has called the war in Iraq this generation's Spanish Civil War. Berman's own biography, of course, makes mincemeat of the analogy. Spain's civil war demanded, in Stephen Spender's words, "a very personal involvement." But unlike George Orwell, André Malraux, Alva Bessie or any of the other writers who fought for the Spanish Republic, Berman has yet to pick up a gun to defend the Iraqi government. Martha Gelhorn claimed that Spain's foreign fighters "knew why they came, and what they thought about living and dying, both. But it is nothing you can ask or talk about." Yet all Berman can do is talk... and talk and talk. Meanwhile, the only international volunteers who seem to believe that Iraq is worth fighting and dying for are joining the other side.



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