True Blue vs. Deep Red: The Ideas that Move American Politics

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Preface: Blue and Red on the Road to Washington

The trip I regularly make from Charlottesville to the think tanks in Washington, D.C., provides a microcosm for examining the much discussed blue-red divide in American politics today. The journey originates from my office on the University of Virginia's historical central grounds, designed by Thomas Jefferson, where the college of arts and sciences is located. This college, like its counterparts in almost all of the nation's upper-tier universities, is a veritable seminary of blue. It was until recently the seat of influence of the renowned philosopher Richard Rorty, now departed for Stanford, whose *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (1998) has widely been hailed as the bible—perhaps handbook is a better word—for a responsible and patriotic Left. And just a couple of months ago, another University of Virginia professor, Eric Lott, published *The Disappearing Liberal Intellectual*, which responds to Richard Rorty—from the Left, of course. It charges Rorty with inspiring a generation of "boomer liberal intellectuals," such well-known figures as Todd Gitlin, Paul Berman, and Michael Kazin, who sold the soul of the Left for a farthing, helping to pave the way for George Bush's imperial wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Situating himself in the "post-boomer" generation, Lott argues, in the philosophic terminology of his age group, that Rorty's positions "suck."[1] The spectrum of advanced academic opinion today, at Virginia and elsewhere, is pretty well bounded by views similar to those of Rorty and Lott.

Quitting the orthodoxy of diversity at the University, I guide my way through the tree-lined streets of Charlottesville. This once sleepy Southern municipality has made a rapid transition from a bastion of Massive Resistance in the 1950s to a model university town, one that compares favorably with such enlightened venues as Ann Arbor, Michigan or Boulder, Colorado. With its substantial African-American population and its many professional neighborhoods attached economically or spiritually to the university, Charlottesville can now be reliably counted on to produce a solid Democratic majority in every election. John Kerry won 73 percent of the city's vote in 2004, making Charlottesville the second bluest jurisdiction in the Commonwealth. The city also meets the only undisputed empirical criterion of what separates Blue America from Red America, as discovered by David Brooks: a favorable ratio of Thai restaurants to church steeples.

The seamless passage from the city to Albemarle County reveals other electoral truths. Until twenty years ago, the county's population was chiefly a mix of a wealthy horsey set

and native rural southerners, of the sort once depicted on *The Waltons*. Like so many of these counties, it had been old-style Democratic earlier in the century, before trending solidly Republican. But the county has been steadily transforming as a result of the in-migration of a large number of retirees, many quite "liquid" (and therefore considered fair prey for the university's development office), and of the expansion of professionals and "knowledge sector" workers connected with the university and its many spin-offs. The growth nationwide of this last segment of the population is the theme of John Judis and Ruy Teixeira's electoral epic, *The Emerging Democratic Majority* (2002), which traces the heroic rise of Postindustrial Man, living in his new "ideopolises." Although not your mother's Democrat, this new creature, according to these authors, holds the key to the inevitable electoral supremacy of the Democratic Party. Victory was supposed to occur in 2004 until grave matters of politics, in the form of the September 11 attack, had the audacity to intrude into people's political judgments and interrupt the deeper logic of socio-economic developments. Still, the Judis-Teixeira thesis could claim some support from Albemarle County, which reached its tipping point and, by the narrowest of margins, 51 to 49, became one of the few new blotches of blue to appear in the interior of America in 2004. Once this critical threshold has been crossed, no return seems likely.

After an interminable line of traffic lights, the sprawl of Albemarle County inching steadily north and east along US Route 29 at long last exhausts itself. The magnificent vistas of the Virginia countryside open up. Rolling fields and pastures appear on the right, the Blue Ridge (inaptly named) becomes visible on the left. Older wooden structures dominate the landscape, replacing the Targets and the Applebees; what modern development one finds consists of a spanking new white Tastee-Freez, a Dollar Store, or a McDonald's tethered to a gas station. Everything now is red. To a conservative, speeding along in the safety of an SUV, it looks as if God's in His heaven and all's right with the world. It's miles of clear sailing through Greene County (66 Bush–32 Kerry), Madison County (62–38), Culpeper County (65–35), and Fauquier County (64–36).

Prince William County marks the outer boundary of Washington's vast exurbia, which is creating a pincer movement from the north that is cutting into the countryside at a rate such as to make Albemarle's growth look paltry by comparison. Shopping malls and housing developments spring up almost overnight, taxing the capacity of even the most creative of developers to invent yet another high-toned name for their new subdivisions. Exurbia in general remains Republican—Prince William went 53 to 46 for Bush—and according to Michael Barone it is a primary source of growth for Red America. Here, in fact, is found the demographic counterargument to the thesis of Judis and Teixeira. Exurban counties are among the fastest growing in America, as Red Americans, especially religious ones, flock to these areas seeking more space to raise their families. They are also making babies more rapidly than the Postindustrialists. The future of American politics lies in the outcome of a race between the loving efforts of these exurbanites and the efforts of universities to convert their offspring.

At the fringe of Prince William County I enter Interstate 66 and pass quickly into massive Fairfax County, a location that has been singled out by Democrats as the poster case of a new "ideopolis." And sure enough, just like Albemarle County, it also tipped to blue in

2004. In this huge and ever-more populated zone, the reality of life is bumper-to-bumper traffic, with the only movement being in the HOV lane, increasingly filled with single "green" drivers in hybrids taking advantage of their special exemption. Finally, a brooding omnipresence announces itself. It might be something that the casual driver, who sees only the bland announcement of Interstate 495, would not notice. But the political scientist knows better. It is the approach of the infamous "beltway," the barrier that, according to the old rhetoric of Ross Perot and of many Republicans, divides "outside" (or good), from "inside" (or corrupt). The mislabeled road sign should read: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." Once "inside," everything changes. The distinctness here lies not so much in the fact that, as in many other cities, one is entering the older, inner suburbs, which nationally have been turning blue (Arlington County, in line with this trend, went massively for Kerry, 68–31); it lies rather in the fact that one is approaching the epicenter of America's political universe, an area, as no other, dominated by the Political Class.

Blue and Red in Today's Political Commentary

Within that class, two schools of thought currently exist about the extent of polarization in America. One of them is headed by Morris Fiorina, who argues in his book *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (2004) that the accidental invention of the red-blue color scheme locked commentators into an exaggerated, binary way of thinking and encouraged them to see stark division where none really exists. Polarization is a stark fact of life within the political class, but Fiorina insists that it is hardly felt by average citizens, whom he renames "normal" Americans. "The simple truth," he writes, "is that there is no culture war in the United States, no battle for the soul of America rages, at least none that most Americans are aware of. Certainly, one can find a few warriors who engage in noisy skirmishes . . . but their hatreds and battles are not shared by the great mass of the American people . . .who are for the most part moderate in their views and tolerant in their manner."[2] So tolerant, in fact, that apparently no stigma attaches to miscegenation between Red Americans and Blue Americans, a practice that appears to be anathema in the political class. Fiorina, himself a zealous moderate, yearns for a return to normalcy. In the latest edition of his book, he offers a few modest institutional fixes, like some tweaking of primary election laws, which might help to dampen polarization. But all of these, as he seems to concede, fall short of a real solution, which could only come by an extermination of the political class.

Another school, headed by James Q. Wilson, argues that polarization has penetrated much more deeply into the American public, if in fact it did not partially emerge therefrom in the first place. (The border between the political class and normal Americans seems more porous for Wilson.) Of course, when you think about it, polarization of the mass public must always have been a question of degree: how many Americans were there in 1860, for example, militating in favor of abolitionism or Southern rebellion? As Wilson puts it, "mass polarization involves a minority of voters," but a minority that is quite sizeable. Anyone studying the question of the extent of polarization would therefore have to judge it finally in a relative way. In Wilson's estimation, the nation today is at one of its highpoints of polarization, in a league with the

late 1790s and the 1860s. Polarization, in his view, is to be measured in part by taking the temperature of the conflicting political beliefs, "where one way of thinking is considered to be morally superior to any other [and] one set of political beliefs is considered to be entirely correct and a rival set entirely wrong."[3] Thousands of expressions of such superiority might be cited as evidence of conflict, all of which Fiorina would no doubt attribute to the irrational exuberances of those in the political class. Still, some are priceless, like the Seattle newspaper that lauded "the real Americans" who reject "heartland 'values' like xenophobia, sexism, racism, and homophobia, [where] people are fatter and dumber and slower. . . . Let them have the shitholes, the Oklahomas, Wyomings, and Alabamas, we'll take Manhattan."[4]

The scholarly debate on polarization, now in full swing, finds each side deploying every known statistical device in the mighty arsenal of social science. But in almost direct proportion to the increase in attention given to measuring polarization, there has been a decrease in attention devoted to investigating its substance. This paper begins where the current wave of polarization studies leaves off: by asking, what is polarization about? rather than by dwelling further on, how much is there? For even if polarization only existed in the large and energetic political class, understanding its substance would still be necessary. The political class, for better or worse, structures much of the nation's political life, and it is not going away anytime soon. The inquiry here into the substance of polarization must obviously extend beyond the one (and only) factor commonly tossed out to describe it—a culture war between believers and secularists. This explanation is insufficient, and, as Wilson rightly observes, perhaps least helpful within the political class, where other factors, philosophical rather than theological, are often at the forefront. The object here, accordingly, will be to supply the categories that can capture the bases of polarization, using terms that allow one to consider the issues that are involved, to reflect on them, and to consider ways of managing or transforming the situation in the future, insofar as that is possible.

Before turning to this inquiry, however, I must complete my journey, which was suspended at the Potomac prior to reaching the destination of Washington's think tanks. Here, too, in the bosom of K-Street and its environs, there is food for thought about the nation's divisions. Beneath the common features of all think tanks—their control desks at the entrances, their carefully designed logoi, and their proud displays of books and pamphlets known as "intellectual product"—a world of difference appears between the institutions on the Left and on the Right. It relates not only—as one would expect—to what they think, but to how they go about thinking. Blue tanks are filled with an impressive array of experts and wonks, often producing studies of the highest quality on the issues of policy confronting the nation. The blue tanks also contain a group of excellent political strategists, skilled not only in nuts-and-bolts analysis but also in high-level social commentary. But something else is apparent: there is hardly a theorist to be found engaged in the study of "classical" political ideas. Now pass over to the red tanks. In addition to an opposing cadre of experts and wonks, each institution has a connection to at least one theoretical school and to the pantheon of its thinkers. Visit these institutions and you will likely hear mention, at some point along the way, of Tradition and Culture, of the "invisible hand" and "spontaneous order," of natural right and natural

law, and of revelation and faith. Nor would it be a shock to overhear a whisper of Edmund Burke or Russell Kirk, Adam Smith or Friedrich von Hayek, James Madison or Leo Strauss, or Calvin or Aquinas.

There is as usual a sociological explanation, in this case one having some plausibility, that has been offered to account for this difference. It says that the Left's domination of the best universities has ensured that conservative theorists cannot find posts there, forcing them to migrate to Washington and settle for either doing time in a think tank or running the government. But there is another explanation, just as plausible, that is more at the surface. It is the character of the ideas themselves. And this explanation might even have enjoyed the favor of the person who invented the word "sociology," Auguste Comte, who wrote that "ideas govern the world, or throw it into chaos."[5] For conservatives, it is clear that the attention they devote to their theoretical principles is meant as much more than a gesture to good breeding. Conservatives consider these principles to be directly related to the political world and to how it should be governed, which is precisely what the Left reproaches them for. As Richard Rorty remarked, "The idea that liberal societies are bound together by philosophical beliefs seems to me to be ludicrous . . . philosophy is not that important for politics."[6]

In contrast, the Left today practices and sometimes preaches what may be described as "idealistic non-foundationalism." This awkward label contains two components. To speak of the Left, even the Left of Washington, D.C., without highlighting its ideals or values—things like compassion, social justice, diversity, and development of personhood, to mention only a few—would be to miss completely what it is all about. Yet—and here the second component of the label comes into play—the liberal rarely links these ideals to a theoretical foundation. For a good many years, and even still today, it has been assumed on the Left that these values were so much a part of what all people, or at any rate all thinking people, espouse, that there was no need to recur to theoretical foundations. The "source" of these values was nothing less, but also nothing more, than the mighty "evolving standards of decency that mark a maturing society," where "maturing"—there is no need to be coy—means chiefly liberal.[7] This is why the rise of the conservative challenge, with its brash introduction of theoretical claims, has been so distasteful to many on the Left. It has indecently broken up a nice party. But when pressed to go beyond the god of "evolving standards," the Left, too, can support a "theoretical" claim of its own. It is that the deeper theoretical foundations, of the sort conservatives invoke, do not really exist in the sense of providing any objective standard; these are merely temporary vocabularies. And more important, we would be better off if these theoretical arguments were not brought into politics as claims of truth. The ideal democratic community can be—should be—constructed without them.

This characterization of the difference between theoretical Red and Blue is not intended to introduce an invidious comparison, but merely to provide an impartial description. There is no reason, at least until a further argument is offered, why the approach of one side should be considered superior to that of the other. It would clearly be absurd to claim that the Right is more "intellectual" than the Left (even supposing "intellectual" were a term of distinction), especially when it is has been established that it is those on the Left,

not on the Right, who prefer to live in ideopolises. Yet despite disclaimers of this kind, I discovered that in sketching this difference once before, at a lecture I presented at Harvard, many on the Left took umbrage at my account. This response was all the more perplexing because I said nothing different from what thinkers on the Left themselves were saying. What I detected on the part of some on the Left is an ambivalence about their position, as if they wished to have their non-foundational cake, but not to eat it, either. The reason for this ambivalence, I surmise, is the "esotericism" of their position. Many on the Left doubt—they say as much in some of their strategy papers—that non-foundationalism, when espoused in its naked form, is currently sellable to the American people, who remain stubbornly retrograde. While those on the Left are apparently willing to talk about this problem among themselves, they are not so comfortable when it is publicly discussed by others.

Foundational Ideas

A treatment of modern politics at this level of abstraction is likely to sound strange and strained. We would be alarmed, indeed, if practical politicians made their decisions by simple recourse to such theoretical ideas, rather than by judging matters on the basis of "facts on the ground." Nevertheless, theoretical ideas can and often do structure how political leaders see and evaluate certain facts on the ground, and these ideas certainly can play a prominent role in explaining and justifying a general course of action to the public. In surveying American history, it is clear that our statesmen invoke such ideas, often, perhaps even especially, at critical moments. In one of the early seminal debates in the Continental Congress in 1774, John Adams recorded that the great issue the Congress discussed was the "*foundation* of right" that would be used to justify American policy: "We very deliberately considered and debated . . . whether we should recur to the law of nature" along with the historical foundations of the tradition, such as the "common law" and "the charters" or "the rights of British subjects."[8] Abraham Lincoln, renown for introducing a "foundation of right" into American politics, once stepped back in the midst of this controversy to reflect, more as a detached analyst than advocate, on the general place of ideas in political life. Addressing an audience in New Haven in 1860, he observed: "Whenever this question [i.e., the question of slavery] shall be settled, it must be settled on some philosophical basis. No polity that does not rest upon some philosophical public opinion can be permanently maintained."[9] Are we to believe that this dimension of politics, once so prominent, has ceased to exist in our age, an age that is so polarized?

To discuss politics by reference to such ideas requires a second and different kind of journey than one across the physical space of northeastern Virginia. It is a journey on a political-theoretical plane that begins with an account of the general category of a foundational concept before descending to an account of the specific applications of these concepts by the Left and the Right in the modern period.

What Lincoln called a philosophical public opinion, or what has been referred to here as a "foundational concept," is a first principle that is offered in politics to supply a justification for a general political orientation. It is often therefore different from merely

proclaiming a "value," which is a bald assertion and normally evokes an equally bald assertion in response. A foundational concept is supposed to provide the basis, or, in certain cases, the rationale for a value. Foundational concepts derive from three sources: nature, History (capitalization to be explained), and faith.

An example is worth a thousand arguments, so a list of statements illustrating each of the three sources will make the point:

> We had no occasion to search into musty records, to hunt up royal parchments, or to investigate the laws and institutions of a semi-barbarous ancestry. We appealed to those of nature, and found them engraved in our hearts.[10] (Thomas Jefferson, 1824)

> Progress! Did you ever reflect that that word is almost a new one? No word comes more often or more naturally to the lips of modern man, as if the things it stands for were almost synonymous with life itself . . . We think of the future, not the past, as the more glorious time in comparison with which the present is nothing. Progress, development—those are modern words. The modern idea is to leave the past and press onward to something new.[11] (Woodrow Wilson, 1912)

> It concerneth New England always to remember that they are originally a plantation religious, not a plantation of trade. The profession of the purity of doctrine, worship and discipline is written upon her forehead. . . . Worldly gain was not the end and design of the people of new England but religion.[12] (1663, as cited by Alexis de Tocqueville, 1835 and Jeremy Belknap, 1792)

Nature, History and faith are all difficult terms that have been given many meanings, both in theoretical discussions and in political speech. Providing definitions, even if they are disputable, will at least allow for a clear discussion.

Nature A foundation in nature provides justification by reference to something in the structure of reality as it can be accessed by reason. Nature is a philosophical (or scientific) concept. It follows that different understandings of science as applied to politics have given rise to different conceptions of nature. Think of current socio-biologists, with their laws of behavior for the little selfish gene, or again of Darwinists with their conception of natural law based on competition. As William Graham Sumner, a famous "social Darwinist" in the nineteenth century, once stated: "The social order is fixed by laws of nature precisely analogous to those of the physical order. . . The law of the survival of the fittest was not made by man and cannot be abrogated by man."[13] These understandings of nature are obviously at odds with the account of the "laws of nature" invoked above by Jefferson, which supplied for many of the Founders the notion of something permanent, pointing toward a fixed standard of right. What people now tend to forget is that these laws were also taken to be a product of a science (or field of rational inquiry) that combined what we call today "psychology" with a kind of rational political analysis.

It is regrettable that this general understanding of "nature" has been all but lost today, and that most take nature to be some big, mystical (or "metaphysical") idea. This unfortunate change has a political source, linked to the Progressive Era. By then, such a weight of tradition had attached to a bundle of older ideas about natural right (themselves often in conflict, but uniformly adhering to the notion of a permanent standard of right), that "nature" had assumed virtual trademark status, like "Xerox" for "copy" or "professor of cultural studies" for "radical Leftist." Progressive opponents of these older ideas sometimes found themselves obliged, against their preferences, to refer to them collectively as *the* concept of nature and when disputing them to denounce the concept of nature itself, rather than to argue publicly for an alternative account of nature.

History A foundation in History is a bit more complicated, which accounts for the use here of a capital *H* The recourse to History offers ultimate explanation or justification by situating things in the flow of time. Something is said to be right or good either because it conforms to the past and our tradition, which is deemed almost sacred or unassailable; or because it conforms to the direction in which the temporal process as a whole is said to be going, usually progress. The first view, which emphasizes the particular traditions of different communities, is sometimes called "Customary History"; the second view, which emphasizes general and universal laws, is usually called "Philosophy of History." History (with a capital *H*) must obviously be distinguished from "ordinary" history (with a small *h*)—what Winston Churchill once described, in a cheerful mood, as "mainly the record of the crimes, follies and miseries of mankind."[14] In selecting a work by a celebrated historian like David McCullough or David Hackett Fischer, one certainly will find instruction about many important things. But there is no expectation that the historian will offer the criteria for making ultimate judgments about right. For that, another kind of "Historian," like Hegel or Marx, should be consulted.

Faith Finally, there are foundations deriving from faith or religion. There was a time in the West when these were at the center of politics. They could come in the form of commands or deductions from revelation that fixed some general and permanent law, or in the form of interpretations of readings of the course of Providence. Yet since the establishment of the liberal state, it has been rarer for faith to claim the role of the sole or primary public source for political life, if only because revelation is something to which all do not have access. Still, such foundations might be indispensable, supplementing and guiding public ones and providing a source for them that even their proponents might not realize or be able to acknowledge.

Foundational Concepts on the Left

The Left is the proper starting point for an analysis of modern foundational thinking, if only because the twentieth century, at least up until the latter part, was dominated by Progressive liberal ideas. This theme was the leitmotiv in many of the public commendations this year of William Buckley on the occasion of his eightieth birthday. Buckley was lauded for establishing a serious voice for conservatism on the national scene where none existed before. The status quo ante was nicely captured by the great

literary critic, Lionel Trilling, in the opening of his book *The Liberal Imagination* (1950): "In the United States at this time Liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition."[15] Conservative impulses, he went on, "do not express themselves in ideas but only in action or in irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas."[16]

The Progressive Ascendancy The original name of Leftist thought was Progressivism. Although Progressivism held sway under its own name only briefly in American politics, during a few years of Wilson's presidency, its foundational premises were subsequently adopted by liberalism. The unity between these two is confirmed by the fact that even to this day liberals when in distress or under pressure revert to the label of Progressive, as in The Progressive Policy Institute. Progressive ideas in their strongest form were fashioned not directly by political actors, but by a remarkable group of public intellectuals. It included Lester Ward (the founder of sociology in America), John Dewey (the nation's preeminent philosopher), Charles Beard, (a celebrated historian), Herbert Croly (the founder of *The New Republic* and a leading publicist), and Walter Lippmann (a great author and political commentator). The original aspiration of these thinkers lacked for nothing in its boldness. They sought to replace, which meant virtually to efface or supplant, the original Founders. Their success, at least within intellectual segments of American society, has led some to characterize Progressivism as the second or alternative founding.

As its etymological root ("progress") indicates, Progressivism subscribed to a Historical idea as its main foundational concept. (It is the only major movement in America to have adopted a Historical category for its label.) Whereas the nation's Founders embraced nature as a foundation and rejected History, the Progressives did just the opposite. They subscribed to Philosophy of History, in which progress was taken to be not merely a hope or sustaining faith, but an objective fact. If one probes Progressivism's pragmatist philosophers a little bit on the exact meaning of progress, it turns out they were reluctant to articulate a definite standard, for fear that it would attach them to some kind of permanent hierarchy. Many followed John Dewey in his linguistic maneuver of shifting from progress to "growth," a term that appeared more open or neutral about ends. (When pressed once to define what growth meant, Dewey is reported to have answered "growth means growing.") But as a practical matter, no one doubted that Progressive goals included scientific development, economic expansion, equality, democracy, and, most vaguely, "individuality."

The Progressives' version of Philosophy of History drew eclectically from different strands of this idea propounded over the previous century—from German idealistic philosophy (mostly that of Hegel), from adaptations of Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory, and, most importantly, from the positivist approach that had come from Comte and was traceable back to Jefferson's friend Condorcet. In this last version, it was thought possible to discover the laws governing the movement of history, just as it had been possible to discover the laws of motion respecting the properties of physical things. In both cases, knowledge could be harnessed for our human benefit. In Condorcet's memorable phrase, there is "a science that can foresee the progress of humankind, direct it, and accelerate it."[17] Even though the direction of History was inevitable, it was still

helpful or necessary that matters be pushed along with the help of those who were conscious of its laws. (Fortunately, human thought had progressed so that this consciousness, in the form of the discovery of Philosophy of History itself, was now at our disposal.) For Condorcet at the end of the eighteenth century, the task of pushing things along belonged to the *philosophe*. For the Progressives, at the dawn of the twentieth century, it fell to the social or policy scientist. This claim on behalf of expertise is exactly what Lester Ward had in mind when he championed a branch of sociology that he named "sociocracy," a discipline designed to plunge us "boldly into the . . . field of social control" under the direction of the sociologists.[18] A new era of governance, relying on the benign guidance of experts, beyond all partisanship, was in the offing. John Dewey, slightly more modestly, referred to the need for the "social conception of intelligence," which was the highest form of our rationality and the one designed to direct us in consciously planned action for the collectivity. Social science was intended to go a long way toward assisting—or replacing—the prudence of legislators and statesman.

This exalted notion of the role of the policy sciences has today been discredited, except perhaps at a few places like the Urban Institute. Only a few economists, usually arguing against social control, have the confidence or hubris to make similar claims of expertise. The loss of this leading role for the policy sciences resulted in part from a powerful internal critique of social scientists by other social scientists, who published widely in *The Public Interest* in the 1970s. But another, even more basic reason for the "fall" of policy science was a collapse in the belief in Philosophy of History, from which the idea of the leadership of experts derived its legitimacy.

The Progressive's adherence to Philosophy of History shows the division that existed at the time within the general category of History. The Progressives despised an attitude of reverence for the past, i.e., any form of Customary History, which they felt only led people to venerate old and useless ways. It was a manner of public thinking that had to be dispelled and destroyed. It was especially important to pull the Founding generation from its pedestal, as many of that generation's ideas were rivals to Progressive thought. Herbert Croly equated honoring the Constitution with submitting blindly to an ancient authority, worshiping it with "superstitious awe"; the Constitution had become the functional equivalent of the monarchy it claimed to replace: "The Law in the shape of the Federal Constitution really came to be a monarchy of the Word."[19] Besides dismissing or debunking the past, one way of profitably studying history was to search for the aspects within it that contributed to creating the higher forms of thought that exist today. History is an account of *development,* which is the perspective Croly adopted in his own *The Promise of American Life* (1909), in which various ideas of the American political tradition were selected and judged from the perspective of their helpfulness in producing the Progressive movement. The premise behind this approach had best been stated by America's first great proponent of Philosophy of History, George Bancroft: "Everything is in motion for the better. The last system of philosophy is always the best. . . . The last political state of the world likewise is ever more excellent than the old."[20]

The Progressives' turn to History, in the form of Philosophy of History, did not consist merely in ignoring the foundation of nature, but in confronting it head on and discrediting

it. For John Dewey the concept of natural rights was sheer "metaphysics," a theory "located in the clouds . . . whose falsity may easily be demonstrated both philosophically and historically."[21] While natural right may have served a progressive purpose in its day, helping to break down the authority of the old regime, its current use was regressive, defending an absolutist view of property and supporting the idea of limited government. Liberty for the Progressive was less a matter of protecting old rights than of taking positive actions to promote greater scope for individuality. In addition, the Founder's "science" of natural right rested on investigations of anthropology or psychology that posited a permanent human nature. Philosophy of History had disproved this premise, showing that human nature changed, so that, to cite Condorcet, "the progress of the perfectibility of man is truly indefinite."[22] This new fact, often referred by Progressives as the "plasticity" of human beings, will be familiar to many in the "boomer generation," who may recall being assigned in college courses on American History the famous essay, "The Founding Fathers: An Age of Realism," written by the latter-day Progressive historian Richard Hofstadter. It concludes by gently taking the Founders' so-called realism to task on the grounds that they "had no hope and offered none for any ultimate organic change in the way men conduct themselves. But no man who is as well abreast of modern science as the Fathers were of eighteenth century science believes any longer in unchanging human nature."[23]

John Dewey raised the objection to the concept of natural right to a higher theoretical plane by arguing that *any* foundation based on a permanent idea of nature was harmful to political life. A view that is "committed to a notion that inherently some realities are superior to others, are better than others . . . inevitably works on behalf of a regime of authority, for it is only right that the superior should lord it over the inferior."[24] A foundation in nature establishes a hierarchical regulative principle that is beyond man's own making or control, thereby fostering an attitude of veneration to a higher authority. Democracy is fully safe only where it is anti-metaphysical or foundation-less. This important position presages the current view of non-foundationalists, according to which a reliance on a foundation of nature—even one as democratic as that "all men are created equal"—is by definition anti-democratic and dogmatic.

Many today ask whether Progressivism and liberalism were in fact one and the same. Certainly on foundational concepts, in the belief in Progress, it is the continuity between the two that stands out. It is nevertheless the case that with the advent of Fascism, Nazism and Communism, many sought a strategic retreat from the direct attacks on the Founding, an attachment to which was seen as an anchor for democracy. And in many cases, at least for a whole line of liberal political actors who became part of the "vital center," the more controversial theoretical points often moved to the background and were forgotten. Either from a change of heart or a change of tactics, many intellectuals concluded as well that it was thought better to run somewhat with the Founders than against them. Certainly, views changed on the Constitution. Liberals embraced the idea of a "living constitution," a doctrine doubly progressive, first in its conceiving of fundamental law itself as an evolving body of doctrine, and second in identifying progress with "social justice" (equality) and "evolving norms of human dignity."[25] In an introductory phase, at the time of the New Deal, the "living constitution" referred to a Constitution that judges would

interpret in a way that would *not* block liberal legislative measures (this was liberal judicial restraint); in a later phase, which began in the 1950s, it referred to a Constitution that judges would interpret in order to promote Progressive-liberal ideas, if need be against legislative measures (this is liberal judicial activism). Liberals also adjusted somewhat in their opposition to the concept of nature, invoking claims of rights that at least echoed the language of the doctrines of natural right. Still, except for a few moments in the opening phases of the modern Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s, they did not generally anchor these rights in a permanent idea of nature, but rather in a kind of evolving consensus. The same holds true today.

The political history of liberalism in the twentieth century splits into two eras, divided by the turmoil of the 1960s. But it was in the previous decade that two prescient analysts, Leo Strauss and Walter Lippmann, foresaw in general terms the impending dilemma for American thought when they called attention to the collapse of the theoretical underpinnings of Progressivism. Not only, as the Progressives themselves had already urged, was it impossible to accept an account of nature as true, because there was no truth in permanence, but it was now also held that there was no objective structure to history. The idea of progress, only recently considered a fact, was now no more than an opinion or object of faith. Charles Beard reflected this shift in his Presidential Address to the American Historical Association (1933), "Written History as an Act of Faith," which called the idea of "a science of history embracing the fullness of history" an "illusion"; each era—each historian within each era—had to choose a frame of reference, which ultimately was a "subjective decision." [26] For Strauss and Lippmann, a nation that had depended from the time of its founding on a rational foundation of some kind was now without one.

The name these analysts gave to the new dominant theoretical position was "historicism," meaning a view that holds that there can be no objective or true perspective, but only the various claims of an age or perhaps each individual. Although touched by the fact that most American thinkers in this circumstance had cast their lot for democracy and progress, Strauss and Lippmann doubted whether mere personal expressions of commitment would be enough to sustain liberalism over the long term or supply the kind of resolute response that would be needed, especially against the new threat of Communism. They had a further reason for doubt. Historicism was almost always packaged together, at least in European thought, with a position deeply hostile to liberal democracy and to the Western project generally. This position held that the scientific or philosophic view dating back to the Enlightenment (or perhaps even to the dawn of philosophy in Greece), was predicated on controlling the world and exploiting all things for human use, in such a way that all things deeply human were being lost. Included in this project of control were all universal instruments of rationality, including the philosophical foundations of natural right (especially its modern universal form of natural rights) and of Philosophy of History. In the words of Theodor Adorno, the Frankfurt School philosopher who spent time in Hollywood influencing *film noir*, "the Enlightenment is totalitarian."[27] (In almost all of this discourse, the name "America" was selected as the symbol for the "totalitarian" position, a fact that helps explain one of the sources of anti-Americanism.) This more radical idea had a peculiar form of Philosophy

of History of its own, based on decline, which contended that the Western project was folding in upon itself and was about to collapse, either in a physical sense, by a visible political or technological disaster, or in a spiritual sense, by a further alienation (or occlusion of Being). In almost apocalyptic fashion, this most dismal of prospects presented a strange opportunity: a chance to retrieve an “authenticity” that had been all but lost.

The collapse of all foundations in America left a theoretical vacuum at the core of American thought. The subsequent efforts on the Left to confront this situation, coming in three responses, describe the theoretical situation of the contemporary Left.

The New Left Alternative The first visible indication of the problem occurred in the next decade with the emergence of the New Left, which split the Democratic Party. The New Left combined different elements, some so bathetic and puerile as to leave many on the Left apologetic (or defensive) to this day. (One thinks, for example, of the arguments of Norman O. Brown, a leading theorist in the movement, who argued that human fulfillment was to be found in “erotic exuberance . . . based on the polymorphously perverse body.”[28]) At the heart of all such expressions, however, lay a simplified template of the path indicated by the radical analysis. New Left thinkers held that Western civilization, led by America, was heading in the wrong direction, toward the nightmare of a technological society and greater alienation. It was not just the laissez-faire capitalism grounded in the American Founders’ doctrine of natural right that was responsible for this moral decline (this had been the Progressive’s argument), but Progressive liberalism as well. Both operated under the thrall of the same rationalism. Progressivism was part of the problem, not part of the solution, and there was no more a place for John Dewey at Woodstock than there was for James Madison. The moral decline that the American tradition had perpetrated, culminating in the Viet Nam War, was so fundamental, so interwoven into the fabric of American life, that only a revolution—one that was cultural as much as political—could reverse it. The New Left married deep pessimism (the decline of the West) to outlandish optimism (the transforming power of the Revolution).

Political leaders on the Left, reaching into the mainstream, felt pressured by the “spirit” of these arguments and occasionally succumbed to them, giving expression to fundamental pessimism and anti-Americanism. A residue of these ideas survives—absent the romantic hope tied to a Revolution—in the Cultural (or multicultural) Left, with its redoubts in the universities. Eric Lott is a stalwart in its post-boomer phalanx. For current political actors today, this way of thinking remains too important to be completely neglected, but obviously too dangerous to be fully embraced.

The Communitarian Alternative A second attempt to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of Progressivism is found in the modern communitarian movement, which has enjoyed broad-gauged support in the academic community and in a few nooks of the political class. Communitarianism has a broad span, enough to support both a Right and a Left wing. What unites them is opposition to a society of unencumbered individuals who press claims of individual rights without limit, whether in a form of an excess of personal

expressivism (most troubling to those on the right) or in the form of unrestricted and predatory economic activity (most troubling to those on the left). The "individual" in these societies is the product of a theoretical construction that derives from universal and abstract philosophical models. These constructed individuals are opposed to genuine human beings—human beings as they should be—who are formed inside of particular communities in their mutual interactions. Theorists of Left Communitarianism have absorbed aspects of the radical critique of the modern project and reject or are suspicious of all universal theoretical doctrines, especially a foundational concept of natural rights, which tears people away from the community. But what forms the community, and who are "we"?

The great theoretical novelty of Left Communitarianism is its appeal to a form of Customary History. This position was first suggested by the political theorist Hannah Arendt, herself an advocate of a kind of communitarian politics, who instead of claiming this merely as her preferred position took the extraordinary step of inscribing it into American history. Not only was there a communitarian element present at the Founding, she argued, but it was at the core of the whole revolutionary movement and in a way that all but denied or excluded any role for a "foundation of right" in nature. The greatness of the Declaration of Independence "owes nothing to its natural-law philosophy. . . . [Its] grandeur consists not in its philosophy and not even so much in its being an argument in support of an action as in its being the perfect way for an action to appear in words."[29] Although this position was initially met with skepticism from members of the historical profession, who regarded it as little more than a thinly veiled attempt at mythmaking, by some miraculous dispensation it rapidly gained ground and emerged, in the form of the "republican thesis" of the 1970s, as the new consensus of the profession.

In searching for the true "we," the "we" that, in Michael Walzer's formulation, must be "more historical than philosophical" and rest on "a reflection on experience rather than a reflection on ideas"—the new party of communitarianism had found its concrete point of reference. It was the Founding, without an abstract principle of right in nature. Certain communitarian theorists became traditional almost to the point of orthodoxy, asserting a correspondence between the original and the good. The source of America's woes had come from a deviation from our roots, in the form of later developments that had embraced abstract philosophies. We have sinned, now we should return. The new Founderism of the communitarians, marked by a strong sense of nostalgia, represents a spectacular departure from Progressivism, with its dismissal of the past in favor of the future and with its adversarial position toward the Founding. The emergence of communitarianism on the Left is a testimony to the collapse of Progressivism. Whether it is a viable substitute is a very different question.

The Non-Foundationalist Alternative The final and most important response to the collapse of Progressivism has been the previously mentioned position of idealistic non-foundationalism. It is the product of a number of recent philosophical schools, very likely not well-known on K Street, that go by such names as "neo-pragmatism," "anti-foundationalism," "anti-essentialism," "the doctrine of public reason," and (in some formulations) "deliberative democracy." These schools are by no means cut from the

same cloth, but they share a common project. They support functioning, advanced democracies, but in such a way that these systems would be modified—as they believe they are already in fact being modified—by the elimination of all strong foundational concepts that influence the political system or the culture at large.

Richard Rorty has provided one of the most compelling defenses of this position. His argument begins by acknowledging exactly the same situation of historicism (or post-modernity) that Strauss and Lippmann described in the 1950s. Only instead of characterizing this situation as a "crisis," he describes it merely as the condition we are in. And that condition, it turns out, provides us with a grand and epochal opportunity. We finally have the chance to construct a society without recourse to any kind of foundational concept. Foundations do enormous harm. By laying claims to knowledge of standards beyond community opinion, they promote dogmatic and rigid thinking. "A liberal society," he writes, "is badly served by an attempt to supply it with philosophical foundations. For the attempt to supply such foundations presupposes a natural order of topics which is prior to, and overrides the results of, encounters between old and new vocabularies."[30] By contrast, a society without foundations can move fluidly from one language game to the next, free of all constraints that come from claims of truth or permanence. The doctrine of non-foundationalism would thus be a boon to American liberal democracy, "chiming . . . with the spirit of tolerance that has made constitutional democracy possible."[31]

Proponents of non-foundationalism obviously have a great deal invested in the condition of historicism or post-modernity, which is wind for their sails. Strauss and Lippmann had attributed enormous influence to the intellectual developments that produced historicism, but neither one claimed that this situation was necessarily permanent. Non-foundationalists often suggest that it is, contending that philosophical time has stopped. For them, the worst-case scenario would seem to be if we entered into a post-postmodern era. The emergence of modern conservatism as a force in America, with its insistence on different foundations, threatens just this kind of dismal prospect. Herein lies a key source of contemporary polarization.

Without foundations, what is it that non-foundationalists propose should guide us? Their answer is that we have nothing more—because there is nothing more—than our currently shared ideals. Rorty is thus every bit as much a "we thinker" as the communitarians, only he boasts that his "we" is larger and more impressive than theirs. Communitarians have invented a mythical community from a bygone era, whereas modern non-foundationalists begin from our existing societies. Their shared values are the values of the modern Left, which include "social justice" and the alleviation of suffering. These values represent the consensus position among the most enlightened thinkers. If enough of these thinkers tell themselves and those who follow them that something is "true," then it must be so. To assist in this project, a little sugar can also be added. Rorty asks artists, writers, film makers and rhetoricians to spin out progressive "narratives of hope" to buoy our spirits and keep us marching on the straight path.

This view, which sounds so much like academic philosophy, because it is, might seem a highly unlikely candidate for much influence in American politics. No sane American politician today would ever repeat the provocative skepticisms of this position in public, much less raise the question of Being, or, as one philosopher recently put it, ask what is, is. But to dismiss this position on account of its academic tone would be an error. It was never intended to be publicly proclaimed in its bald form, at least until the ground had been prepared by years of soaking. It was meant for now to work indirectly, encouraging a slow draining of belief in the authority of all foundational concepts. Non-foundationalism does its job when intellectuals and political leaders treat the old and prized foundations as mere shibboleths, to be used for ritualistic purposes only. Much of the West has already absorbed this view, and if the Left has its way America may not be that far behind.

Foundational Concepts on the Right

The conservative movement today is constructed from a "coalition of the willing" comprised of proponents of four foundational concepts: Customary History, spontaneous order, natural right, and faith. Each of these four "heads" can be connected to a body, which are known, respectively, as: traditional or paleo-conservatism, libertarianism, neo-conservatism, and the religious right. The principles of these four groups are so distinct that it is a wonder how they can ever make common cause. What induces them to join and remain in the same coalition is a single, self-evident truth: Hillary Clinton. Liberalism is the glue that cements the conservative movement, and if liberalism were to disappear tomorrow, the conservative movement as we know it would begin to disintegrate on the next day.

No shame attaches—or should—to relying in politics on the adhesive properties supplied by common antipathy. America is a vast country in which it is only by coalition that a movement can hope to achieve a majority. Liberalism, too, is a kind of coalition, for which animosity toward conservatism (and toward George Bush) serves as an energizing force. But of the two coalitions, conservatism is the more heterogeneous, consisting of parts that do not even pretend to be guided by the same principles. Liberals often like to think that they are inspired by the same set of ideals, which may help explain why conflicts among contesting factions often lead to charges of heresy or "sucking." Conservatives suffer much less from this problem, because their different parts operate under no illusions about ultimate agreement on first principles. Liberal critics often view this heterogeneity as a fatal weakness and ask how a movement with four heads can be considered as anything more than a political monster. But conservatives in more tender moments view the creature in a different light. The intense debate among its talking heads sharpens thinking and discourages intellectual complacency, which is the death knell of any party. Better, they say, four heads than none.

Two of conservatism's four foundational principles—Customary History and spontaneous order—were articulated during the era of Progressive dominance, well before its crisis in 1960. Both were advanced as responses to Progressivism, and while

neither enjoyed very much political influence at the time, they have both survived and, in light of subsequent events, greatly prospered.

The Traditionalist Alternative The traditionalist position can be traced to a group of Southern intellectuals who in 1930 produced a controversial tract, *I'll Take My Stand*: *The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930). These Southern Agrarians, as they styled themselves, directly challenged the foundation of progressive Philosophy of History. Their book opened by proclaiming "support of a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way of life."[32] The American way of life was life devoted to the "Gospel of Progress," the evangelists of which were both the defenders of laissez-faire capitalism and the Progressives. To the Agrarians these two groups were essentially the same, differing only on the means of how to achieve their end, which was the materialist conquest of nature. The American Way of Life was life without a moral end or meaning: "Progress never defines its ultimate objective, but thrusts its victims into an infinite series."[33] Modernity is on a treadmill. The idea of progress also lacked an appreciation for the tragic dimension of human existence. Contrary to all experience, it preached a thin and unrealistic account of a steady march ever upwards and onwards.

As the alternative to Philosophy of History, the Agrarians offered a return to the Southern tradition—a loose version of the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian view understood as in-grown culture, without any mention of a foundation in nature. The philosophic dimension—the rationalism of natural rights—was associated with Lincoln and the Republican Party, which helped create the modern Leviathan and "the American Way of Life." In an effort to broaden their movement, the Agrarians appealed to all regionalisms—not just that of the South—insofar as they held out against the thin materialism and homogenizing effects of modern mass culture. As one might have expected, the idea of creating a national tradition by rejecting the American way of life posed an insuperable political problem, and the Agrarian movement as a political force or party was stillborn.

The Agrarians did, however, provide inspiration to the next generation of traditionalist intellectuals, led by Russell Kirk, who introduced the more general framework of Customary History that drew directly on the analysis of Edmund Burke. Kirk linked our tradition to older, pre-theoretical roots said to exist in Britain and in colonial America. Included in this culture, without any clear principle of order, were a commitment to liberty, religiosity, individualism, and the cultivation of certain virtue. The source of these values lay in our "culture," in the historical rights of Englishmen, but not in any philosophical claims of natural right. This stance left Kirk defending an American tradition while rejecting what seemed some of its cardinal elements: a revolutionary break with Britain and a new founding based on the concept of natural right. In his view, which anticipated Hannah Arendt, the American Revolution had little to do with the foundation of natural rights. The decline of America began on the evening of July 3, 1776.

Traditionalism has changed greatly since the 1950s. If it has developed a rougher side that likes to use a pitchfork to poke at anything that might disturb the tradition, it has also grown a more sophisticated side that has managed to keep the spirit of Burke alive inside

an appreciation of the Founding and of James Madison. Under the influence of modern traditionalist intellectuals, such as William Buckley and George Will, it has found a place for natural rights understood in a moderate version that remains attuned to the dangers of abstract doctrines. While some of the old reservations about modern mass culture remain, there is none of the agrarian hostility to capitalism or to modern development. The modern traditionalist accepts and thoroughly embraces the world in which he—and now one is also entitled to say, she—lives.

Closer examination of the traditionalists' foundational concept of Customary History reveals that their attachment to culture or tradition is nearly as important for what it opposes as for what it affirms. Customary History was originally elevated to its high theoretical status by Edmund Burke in order to serve as an antidote to the kind of radical thinking that animated the French Revolution. Traditionalism tends to conflate any broad exercise of rationalism with the exercise of its doctrinaire variant, on the grounds that they are in fact the same or that the one invariably leads to the other. Culture or tradition is thus good because it is already there on its own, and no one ever had to think it up. Traditionalists prefer what *grows* in politics—hence "culture," originally an agricultural term—to what is made wholesale by human reason.

The Libertarian Alternative The second early conservative challenge to the Progressives came in the 1940s, in the form of a revival of classical economic thinking introduced by the so-called Austrian School, led by its two seminal thinkers, Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich von Hayek, both immigrants to America. The foundational concept that underlies this part of conservatism is the natural principle of "spontaneous order," a postulate that holds that there is a tendency for things to work out for themselves and to cohere, provided no effort is made by an outside force to interfere by seeking to impose an overall order. Most are familiar with the idea of spontaneous order from the study of economics, where it goes under an assumed name of "the invisible hand." The hand works behind our backs to ensure that while each person or unit pursues its own particular interest, unconcerned with the whole, the result will be to the benefit of all.

The revival of classical economic theory provided a principled argument against Progressive rationalist planning. Rather than opposing rational schemes of planning on the basis of a vague opposition to the new or to abstract thought, the economists offered specific and rational reasons for doing so. They could demonstrate the inefficiencies and ineffectiveness of central plans. Far from wishing to turn the clock back or to return to an older order, the economists sought the best way forward. Their contention was always that they were more modern than the Progressives. Later generations of conservatives have applied this same kind of reasoning in their criticism of many large government social and welfare programs. As expressed in the rough and tumble of political debate, their target is "Big Government," by which is meant not just government that is large in scope, but that operates pursuant to the idea that centralized planning is the best way to resolve problems.

The larger issue raised by the revival of classical economic thought, however, relates to the status that is claimed for the principle of spontaneous order. Is it a subsidiary

principle that governs behavior only within the important but circumscribed areas of economics and social policy, or is it a deeper foundational principle that directs all human affairs? This last position is the "libertarian" idea. For libertarians, economics, far from being a dismal science, is queen of the sciences and architectonic of most important fields of human knowledge. The general idea of spontaneous order, which operates throughout human affairs, allows for a libertarian science of international relations, of domestic politics, and of historical movement itself. The application of the idea of spontaneous order to history, which finds extensive support in the writings of Hayek, has produced a "conservative" version of the progressive Philosophy of History. Progress is the working out of the principle of spontaneous order in time, as efficiency is the working out of this principle in space. History is subject to an evolutionary process wherein better practices are selected, producing a series of growing successes, unless this process is thwarted by efforts to plan the outcomes. Libertarianism is without question the most optimistic current of thought in existence today.

Since the 1960s two "new" foundational concepts have been introduced into American politics from the conservative side: natural right and faith. That either one of these by itself should have been able to gain a genuine purchase in a modern nation is highly improbable. After all, much of modern thought has purported to demonstrate that we live in a post-foundational and post-religious world that is beyond anyone's capacity to alter. That both of these foundations together should have appeared in the same nation, as parts of the same movement, and even as its closest partners, is almost miraculous. It is this fact that makes American conservatism the most exceptional—as well as the most despised—of all political movements in the West.

The Natural Right Alternative The reemergence of a concept of natural right in American national life has slowly but steadily been taking place now for nearly forty years. This principle played a prominent role during the Cold War, when it was invoked to help draw a clear line between liberal democracy and Communism and to offer a basis for combating the skepticism and relativism of many in the West who were unwilling to condemn Communism. And it was subsequently introduced in many of the debates over quota policies, diversity programs and multiculturalism. But the concept of natural right has clearly become most visible as a public issue in the last few years. In directly invoking a version of natural right as a primary underpinning and justification for his administration's approach to foreign policy, George Bush has raised the question of natural right and foundationalism itself to a level not experienced in a very long time. This has become a part of modern-day polarization. And so too, of all things, has the political philosopher Leo Strauss. Critics of George Bush have raised the spectre of what they refer to as "Straussianism," a term that used to conjure up images of some kind of secret and sinister force. Bowing to current linguistic practice, I employ the term here, but only in accord with the strictest canons of modern social science, using it as a value-free concept to designate the position of neo-natural right.

It is obviously an exercise in foolishness to try to link a philosopher like Leo Strauss, many years after his death, to a concrete policy on which he took no stand. Broad foundational principles in any case always allow for much variation in their specific

application, and by no means are all proponents of neo-natural right on the same page as President Bush. Yet there is certainly nothing amiss in introducing the name of Leo Strauss in the more general discussion of natural right, because he was among the earliest to entertain the possibility of recapturing the intelligibility of this concept as a foundation for contemporary political life. Whatever may have been Strauss's own exact views on this subject, there is no doubt that a large number of thinkers who were influenced by Strauss took up and developed this possibility and in turn directly influenced many within the modern conservative movement. Launching this project involved not just a recovery of a genuine understanding of the meaning of natural right, which had largely been lost, but also a discussion and critique of the rival foundation of History in all of its forms. These two theoretical inquiries were two sides of the same coin, just as they had been for the Progressives.

Strauss' critique of History was the more accessible part of his writing and also the one that has proven the most controversial within the conservative camp. Strauss had no quarrel with the usual analysis that the two Historical foundations—Philosophy of History and Customary History—had for a long time helped to define the poles of action in practical politics between Left and Right, although he pointed out the many ways they had converged. At the deepest level, however, he argued that they were both expressions of the same fundamental premise: that right could be discovered in History, not in nature. The fundamental theoretical choice was not between these two variants of History, but between History and nature. This argument denied one of the most fundamental tenets of conservative thought since Burke. Strauss's position—his new form of conservatism—is closer, at least in its mode of thought, to the American Founders (understood as thinkers who introduced natural right) and to Abraham Lincoln than to Burke or to his traditionalist heirs. This shift of focus has completely altered the thinking of the modern conservative movement.

Whatever their truth as judged by philosophical criteria, foundational concepts are also instruments of politics and must therefore be analyzed from the standpoint of their political consequences. Strauss surveyed the effects of History as a political foundation, showing the obvious link of Philosophy of History to doctrinaire thinking and to Communism. But he spent much of his time studying the less obvious effects of Customary History. His conclusion was that whatever initial success traditionalism might have had had in combating doctrinaire rationalist thinking in the nineteenth century, its net practical political benefits had come to an end by the twentieth century. The idea of Customary History as a foundation led to the emergence of historicism, including its frequent manifestations of support for the most irrational regimes, and its modern variant we know today as postmodernism. Its major practical impact was therefore no longer conservative, in the Burkean sense of serving to moderate. For Strauss, the turn to History had become the great idol of modern thought. The Classics, he wrote, did not "dream of a fulfillment in History and hence not of a meaning of History."[34] Man could no longer fight the errors of rationalism by relying on Customary History. The excesses of rationalism could only be combated by a return to a rationalism of a higher order.

The foundational concept of natural right is a theoretical way of saying that the standard of right or good, so far as political or social action is concerned, is ascertainable by human reason. An idea of right derived from reason would apply in principle to all, or would be universally valid, however much distinct cultural influences might impede its recognition or render impracticable its implementation. It follows as well for the adherent of neo-natural right that human thought or reason, though vastly constrained by circumstances, can be an instrument to help alter or structure the environment in which we live. For adherents of this position the American Founding is an emblematic event because of its framing of a system by "reflection and choice"; for traditionalists, like Samuel Huntington, the founding is better viewed as a piece of evolution in the development of Anglo-Protestant cultural values. Where prudence for the traditionalist is equated with caution or defensiveness, for the neo-conservative it can sometimes mean boldness. Adherents of natural right, in line with traditionalists, concede that most of what has been offered politically under the name of reason in recent times—say the last couple of centuries or so—has been dangerous abstraction and ideology; they hold, nevertheless, that the course of correction must come ultimately from reason itself, not from its renunciation, which leads to severe excesses of its own. It will not do to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

The Faith Alternative Faith, the foundational concept of those who now comprise the religious right, is unlike any of the other foundational concepts. It is concerned in the first instance not with politics, but with another realm: man's relation to the transcendent. (Indeed, many who joined to form this movement in the later part of the 1970s had been apolitical for much of the last century.) Faith has been no stranger to political action, notwithstanding the recent claims of some, bent on discrediting the religious right, who insist that a kind of wall of separation has long existed in America between political activity and the exercise of faith. This argument rewrites history by conveniently ignoring the experience of the 1960s and early 1970s, when the religious convictions of many prompted them to become involved in politics, for the most part in the movements for Civil Rights and against the Viet Nam War. Many on the religious right have likewise felt a call of faith to participate on specific issues, most notably opposition to the current legal regime on abortion. But there is little doubt that the religious right has emerged in large part as a result of a different type of concern. It has developed in response to the massive threat, posed by the process of secularization and even more by the proponents of secularism, to the place of religion and to its role in shaping American culture.

Faith as a foundational concept in the political realm does not aim to supply a complete standard of political right, but supports a second-order political-cultural project. The defensive part of the project has been to protect havens within society conducive to fostering a community that recognizes faith. The positive part can be traced to an older idea, one originally of Puritan roots, of America's role—America here not as political system or power, but as a place where the faithful had come to live and worship—in God's providence, which was to serve as a haven for the true church (the "reform church") and a beacon for spreading its light. To many of faith, it had never been thought—as many secular-minded hold today—that a political system founded on the theory of political liberalism was incompatible with the maintenance of a society that is

dedicated to serving or promoting a higher end. The adoption of the legal Constitution in 1787, by this account, never abrogated the understanding that America had a special calling. Expressed in slightly different terms, the nation was understood to have two constitutions, its legal document and a second and unwritten constitution that was meant to operate alongside of it. The unwritten constitution was meant to help structure the culture or the mores of society, and even, in ways not always easy to see or to acknowledge, to fortify its ultimate political principles. Because these two constitutions deal with fairly distinct matters, there was no need to combine them into a single document—indeed, the attempt to do so would ill serve the purposes sought by both of them. The two constitutions exist together in the hearts and thoughts of many Americans and are complementary in practice. For those of this view, America is not fully America—it cannot be fully loved and cherished—if this unwritten constitution is renounced and if faith survives here, at best, as merely one belief among many. The assault judged to be taking place against this second or unwritten constitution—the aim to replace it with an alternative unwritten constitution—is what prompted the emergence of the religious right.

The initial energy of the religious movement came almost entirely from segments of the Protestant community, often described as evangelical or fundamentalist. The movement's purely Protestant character has since been modified, with the influx of large numbers of Catholics and Jews into the conservative religious network. The Evangelical or Fundamentalist right has turned into a religious, predominantly Biblical, right. One of the major intellectual tasks of this movement is the reformulation of the old project in a form that speaks to the conditions of our age. Once conceived by the Puritans as a mission of the "reformed" church only, the religious project today is being reconceived—I am not speaking of the fine points of theology—as a common enterprise among those of Biblical faith. It includes meeting the challenge of those who conceive of modern society as being rightly "post-religious." While the theological differences remain among the Biblical religions, as well as a few of the old prejudices, one of the most important transformations in American politics has been a change in relations among the faithful of the Biblical religions, where a common community of interest has developed. The major "religious" cleavage is not among the different religious sects, but increasingly between a segment of those of stronger faith (and committed to a project to maintain it) and those who are secular. This is the aspect of current political polarization that has gone by the name of the "Culture War." It is all too easy to decry the ravages of that war, without acknowledging what it has done to settle sectarian conflict.

Conclusion

There was once a time when the idea of "foundationalism" itself hardly existed as a distinct category of thought in political science, not because there were no foundations, but on the contrary because no one supposed that a political system could exist without one. There were, of course, always skeptics who doubted the truth of any kind of theoretical claim, but they never dared to try to make this belief a basis for a public doctrine. Boldness formerly was not the character of these thinkers. But of late they have grown active and designing, and they have developed a full-scale political theory. It

begins by ascribing common attributes to a major general category of foundations, as if what all the instances in this general category shared was as important as what differentiated them. Under this approach, the qualities found in the worst of them could be used to taint the qualities of all of them, as in the claims that any and all foundations promote rigidity, fanaticism, and authoritarianism. The next step in this analysis has been to assert that the problems caused by foundations can be overcome by a new and simple expedient: eliminating foundations altogether. A new kind of society, free of all foundations, can be constructed. It is the only society deserving of the name of being truly democratic.

This position, or something quite similar to it, has been gaining ground throughout much of the West and it is now approaching the status of being a reigning public doctrine in many countries. In America, its progress has been more problematic. The adoption of this notion by much of the Left happened to coincide with the emergence of a new conservative movement, which has enjoyed a great deal of political success, certainly in relation to where it had been. Meanwhile, the liberal movement has not recently achieved all that it would have hoped for, though in truth it is almost in a position of political parity. It appears altogether plausible that these two developments—the embrace of non-foundationalism and a loss of ground by the Left—have had some connection. You can certainly find many Republicans who thump their chest and celebrate their convictions, while a good many Democrats now admit that they have a "vision" problem, by which they might mean on reflection a foundation problem. As even Ruy Teixeira of emergent Democratic Majority fame has recently noted, "a majority of Americans do not believe progressives or Democrats stand for anything," from which he concludes that standing for something may be an important element to improving the party's electoral fortunes. It admittedly might seem to put the cart before the horse to say that because you need to have a foundation, you should go out and get one, but this is nothing more than an expression of pragmatism applied to foundational thinking.

Even if there is plausibility in this argument, conservatives would make a great mistake to think that by embracing foundations they have bought a sure ticket to electoral success. Nor is it at all clear that liberals could not win with a duly veiled non-foundationalist platform. No one can foretell electoral outcomes from deductions at this level. Political life often moves by its own forces. What human thought can consider, however, are the large potential consequences for the nation of adopting a non-foundationalist or a foundationalist position. This is a question worthy of consideration from a perspective beyond partisanship.

The non-foundationalist position represents a utopian experiment that has as yet no basis in real political science. Nothing in experience suggests it could ever work, at least for a nation that is tasked with performing an important role on the stage of world history. Without a foundational principle, even more without the moral energy that derives from a concern for foundational principle, a community cannot exist in a deep or meaningful sense. And without this energy, a community would be unable to extract from its members the added measure of devotion and resolve that are needed for its survival and for undertaking any important projects. What is involved, ultimately, in the shift to non-

foundationalism is an evacuation of what makes a nation. When the illusion of a genuine nation existing without foundations is finally acknowledged—if it is acknowledged—political life will return to the real political question: which is not whether to have a foundation, but rather, which one(s) to embrace and in what mixture. This conclusion only gets us back to where sensible political life begins, which is finding foundational remedies to the problem most incident to foundational thinking. On that ground, and that ground alone, let the polarization continue.

NOTES

[1] Eric Lott, *The Disappearing Liberal Intellectual* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 31.
[2] Morris Fiorina, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004), 5.
[3] James Q. Wilson, "Divided We Stand," *WSJ.com Opinon Journal*, February 15, 2006, http://www.opinionjournal.com/federation/feature/?id=110007966.
[4] *The Stranger*, "The Urban Archipelago: It's the Cities, Stupid," Nov. 11-17, 2004, quoted in Kotkin, Joel, "American Cities of Aspiration . . . and the Decline of Euro-America," *The Weekly Standard*, February 14/February 21, 2005.
[5] Lester Ward, *Applied Sociology; a treatise on the conscious improvement of society by society* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1906), 41.
[6] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 86; and *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 135.
[7] This phrase was cited in the majority opinion by Justice Kennedy in the case of *Roper v. Simmons* (2005); it was originally used in *Trop v. Dulles*, 356 U. S. 86, 100–101 (1958) (plurality opinion).
[8] John Adams, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, vol. 2 (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1850), 371 (emphasis added).
[9] Abraham Lincoln, speech at New Haven (New Haven, CT, March 6, 1860).
[10] Jefferson to John Cartwright, June 5, 1824.
[11] Woodrow Wilson, *The New Freedom: A Call for the Emancipation of the Generous Energies of a People* (New York: Doubleday, 1913), passage taken from a 1912 Presidential campaign speech.
[12] From a sermon given in 1663, quoted in Jeremy Belknap, *The History of New Hampshire* (3 vols., 1784–92), vol. 1, ch. 3, as quoted in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Appendix F, 688-89.
[13] William Graham Sumner, "Socialism" in *On Liberty, Society, and Politics: The Essential Essays of William Graham Sumner,* ed. Robert C. Bannister, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1992), 172, xxiii.
[14] Winston Churchill, *The Gathering Storm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), 345, 346. The statement he is recalling, from Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* vol. I (1776–1788; repr., New York: Modern Library, 1995), 60, is "the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind."
[15] Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Viking Press, 1950), ix (1949 date of preface).
[16] Trilling, *Liberal Imagination*, p. ix (1949 date of preface). Conservatives agreed. In *God and Man at Yale*, Buckley characterized his Alma Mater as an institution that "derives its moral and

financial support from Christian individualists and then addresses itself to the task of persuading the sons of these supporters to be atheistic socialists." William F. Buckley, *God and Man at Yale* (Chicago: Regnery, 1951), pp. xv, xvi.

[17] Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795; repr., New York: Noonday Press: 1955).

[18] Lester Ward, *Dynamic sociology , or Applied social science, as based upon statistical sociology and the less complex sciences*, vol. 1 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1883), 60.

[19] Herbert Croly, *Progressive Democracy* (1914; repr., New Brunswick: Transaction Press, 1998), 77.

[20] Bancroft, "Speech to the New York Historical Society," 1858. If this sounds like Hegelianism, the simplest explanation is that it almost certainly was. Bancroft, like a number of other prominent historians at the time, did his advanced work in Germany. He attended a course of Hegel's in Berlin, which he described as "unintelligible half the time"—a fact that proves beyond any doubt that he understood Hegel better than any of his contemporaries.

[21] John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (1939; repr., New York: Prometheus, 1989), 120; Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920; repr., Boston: Beacon Press 1957), 44. {The Progressives of course had a concept of nature (Darwinism), which they sometimes awkwardly labeled "naturalism," but they did not rely on it directly to derive an idea of right. John Dewey, *The Political Writings*, Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro, eds. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993), 81.

[22] Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet, quoted in Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 207.

[23] Richard Hofstadter, "The Founding Fathers: An Age of Realism," in *The Moral Foundations of the American Republic,* ed. Robert Horwitz, 3rd ed., 62–74 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1986), 85

[24] Dewey, *The Political Writings*, 45.

[25] See G. Edward White, *The Constitution and the New Deal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 198-236.

[26] Charles Beard, "Written History As an Act of Faith" (presidential address to the American Historical Association, Urbana, IL, December 28, 1933). Available online at http://www.historians.org/info/AHA_History/cabeard.htm.

[27] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, trans. John Cumming (1972; repr., New York: Continuum, 1995), 6.

[28] Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Middletown, Conn.: Weslyan University Press, 1959), 236.

[29] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (1963; repr., Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books: 1965), 51.

[30] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, 51, 52.

[31] Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 132-133.

[32] Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930), ix.

[33] Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand*, ix. John Crowe Ransom, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate," in *I'll Take My Stand*, p. 8

[34] Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny, an interpretation of Xeonophon's Hiero*, (1948; revised and expanded version, New York: Free Press, 1991), 210.