

Introduction

The Liberal Fifties

Most historians see the 1950s as a conservative era in U.S. history, a time when anticommunism subverted reform, crushed dissent, and ended liberal dreams of social democracy. According to historians, the Cold War, McCarthyism, and the Eisenhower administration represented a turn to the Right, a negation of New Deal liberalism, an end to reform. The warfare state canceled out the welfare state. True, there were the beginnings of a civil rights movement, a Beat culture, and other signs of discontent and change, but these occurred on the margins of society. The political economy and the dominant political discourse were, historians tell us, conservative.¹

Yet throughout the 1950s, the U.S. government redistributed wealth, taxed the rich, regulated corporate practices, engaged in public works projects, and generally carried out a liberal, New Deal agenda. This book argues that, far from subverting the New Deal state, anticommunism and the Cold War enabled and fulfilled the New Deal's reform agenda. It shows that anticommunism solidified liberal political power in the late 1940s and that the Cold War furthered liberal goals such as jobs creation, corporate regulation, economic redevelopment, and civil rights. It shows that, despite President Eisenhower's professed conservatism, his administration maintained the highest tax rates in U.S. history, expanded government programs, and supported major civil rights reforms. It shows that conservatives were on the defensive in the 1950s and that the Cold War divided and weakened the conservative movement. Its evidence comes from existing primary and secondary sources.

In some ways, my argument is simply a reaffirmation of the idea of the "liberal consensus." This term refers to the broad bipartisan acceptance

of government as a positive force in society, one that could promote economic growth and social harmony at home and contain Communism abroad. Journalist and historian Godfrey Hodgson dates the beginning of the consensus to 1954, with the censuring of Senator McCarthy. But I think the consensus on these basic assumptions was in place by 1947–48, when Congress approved the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan and both parties endorsed legislation prohibiting racial discrimination in employment. McCarthy was clearly on the outside of that consensus, condemned by liberal Democrats, moderate Republicans, and the media. Indeed, McCarthy's ire was in many ways directed against the newly formed consensus, which repudiated extremism and ideological politics, whether on the Left or the Right. This consensus dominated American politics from the late 1940s until it began to unravel in the late 1960s, with the Vietnam War and white backlash, and fell apart completely in the late 1970s, when liberal economic policies proved unable to avert or correct the economic crises of that era.

Historians have acknowledged the existence of this consensus but they have, mostly, been critical of it. In his widely read book *America in Our Time* (1976), for instance, Godfrey Hodgson portrayed the liberal consensus as an emaciated, watered-down, co-opted version of New Deal liberalism, “a strange hybrid, liberal conservatism,” he called it, that served the needs of U.S. capital and subverted more radical change. He wrote: “Confident to the verge of complacency about the perfectibility of American society, anxious to the point of paranoia about the threat of communism – these were the two faces of the consensus mood.”² More recently, some historians have abandoned the concept altogether, arguing not only that the period in question was not liberal, but also that there was never a consensus, especially on civil rights. Pointing to the resistance and violence toward civil rights initiatives, Gary Gerstle's “Race and the Myth of the Liberal Consensus” (1995) and Thomas Sugrue's *The Origins of the Racial Crisis* (1997) argued that racial liberalism was hardly a dominant political influence in these years. Recent books about the conservative ascendancy concur and tend to see the era primarily as a seedtime for the conservative movement, arguing that whatever consensus there was about the liberal state was fragile and weak. “Even at its zenith,” writes Kim Phillips-Fein, “liberalism was less secure than it appeared to be.”³

I think this line of reasoning is mistaken. What is remarkable about these years, roughly 1945 to 1980, is precisely how solid and pervasive liberal ideas about government, racism, and society were among people

in positions of power and influence, that is, among politicians, CEOs, journalists, government officials, and professors. Nor were these ideas watered down versions of some earlier, more radical, purer sort of liberalism. They were the apotheosis of modern American liberalism, which held that an activist state was the best guarantor of human progress and that “rugged individualism” was an outdated myth. Yes, there were dissenters – this was not a totalitarian society. But the dissenters were an unorganized minority. They could occasionally obstruct legislation or publish the odd journal but they could not persuade large numbers of people that, for instance, “government was the problem.” They wouldn’t be able to do that until 1980.

It is true that white Americans of all classes, parties, and regions held assumptions about people of color that we today (and many then) would consider racist. It is true that white liberals especially had difficulty overcoming, or even acknowledging, their own racism. But it is also true that beginning in the 1950s white people in positions of power devised and supported various measures, including legislation, to end racial discrimination and segregation in employment, education, housing, and public facilities.

This situation existed not despite but rather because of anticommunism and the Cold War. Anticommunism justified liberal reforms, including civil rights. The desire to beat the Communists, to show the world that capitalism was a humane, progressive system, prompted employers and politicians to acquiesce to reforms, labor regulations, and government programs they would never have supported otherwise. The fear of Communism made Americans more willing to use the state to improve society. The Cold War was a national emergency that normalized the idea of government spending and recast the federal government as the defender of liberty against Communism. In his 2001 book, *The Strange Death of American Liberalism*, historian H.W. Brands similarly argued that “the Cold War was a necessary precondition for the success of post-war liberalism.”⁴ But Brands’ focus was on the Kennedy/Johnson-style liberalism of the 1960s. My concern is the pervasiveness of liberal ideas even among Eisenhower Republicans and their expression not just in foreign policy, but also in the domestic and economic policies of the 1950s. The era was, as historians Jefferson Cowie and Nick Salvatore have suggested, part of a “long exception,” in American history, a detour from the deep-rooted tradition of antistatism and property rights, a time when the American political culture favored redistributionist economic policies and activist government.⁵ It is not mere coincidence that this “long

exception” occurred and attained its greatest strength during the Cold War, amidst anticommunism.

The Liberal Agenda

Let us begin by defining the post–World War II liberal agenda, which was less about specific programs and policies than solidifying once and for all the idea that the United States had outgrown its traditional adherence to limited government, states’ rights, isolationism, and rugged individualism. This agenda was not limited to a single party but was shared by liberal Democrats and moderate Republicans alike; it transcended party politics – although it was very much at the center of partisan maneuvering, as each party’s liberals castigated the other party’s conservatives. Although we tend to associate modern liberalism with the Democratic Party because of the New Deal, both parties were heirs to the Progressive movement. Indeed, the Republican Party had stronger historical connections to civil rights because of its role in emancipation and Reconstruction and its consequent political freedom from southern Democrats. Moderate Republicans did not see themselves as “liberals,” however, a term commandeered by New Dealers, who took the lead in defining modern liberalism.

By the end of the Second World War, those who called themselves liberals stood for an expansive, activist federal state that could regulate the excesses of a free market capitalist economy and balance the interests of the various organized groups in American society. During the 1930s they had been New Dealers but the perimeters and possibilities of the New Deal were unsettled then and so too was the term liberal.⁶ World War II clarified and limited what a liberal state might look like. Radical interventions such as planned economies, cradle-to-grave welfare, or shared corporate governance were discarded as American liberals embraced welfare and regulatory policies that operated within the framework of free market capitalism. Liberals who helped define postwar liberalism saw themselves as upholding the New Deal, not abandoning it. They included (to name just a few) labor leaders such as Phillip Murray, Walter Reuther, and A. Philip Randolph; political leaders such as Hubert Humphrey, Paul Douglas, and Chester Bowles; public figures such as Eleanor Roosevelt; and intellectuals and economists such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., James Wechsler, Reinhold Niebuhr, Daniel Bell, John Kenneth Galbraith, Walter Heller, Richard Hofstadter, Lionel Trilling, Adolf Berle, and Sidney Hook.

After the war, liberals hoped that the Democratic Party would enact specific new social welfare programs, such as national healthcare and a national fair employment act. That did not happen, however, in part because liberal Democrats were unable to secure the political power they needed to enact such programs. Republicans swept into Congress in 1946 and were able to pass the antilabor Taft–Hartley Act over President Truman’s veto in 1947. Democrats regained control of Congress in 1948 but then lost the White House in 1952. The Republican Party, as signified by the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower and the perfidy of Joseph McCarthy, dominated the politics of the 1950s. Although Democrats controlled Congress for all but one term during Eisenhower’s tenure, their control depended in large part on southern Democrats who often voted with conservative Republicans. The liberal candidate for president, Adlai Stevenson, was defeated twice during the 1950s, another sign of their political weakness. Thus, liberal Democrats as a group felt politically disempowered, a minority, a critical voice trying to be heard amidst the complacency and country club conformity of the 1950s. Historians have largely replicated liberals’ feelings of disempowerment in their accounts of the 1950s, affirming the idea that American politics had shifted to the right after the war.⁷

But social welfare programs and political power were not the whole of the liberal agenda. More basic to the liberal agenda was a commitment to the idea that centralized state power, that is, the federal government, could be a progressive, benevolent, unifying force in a democratic society, one that could control the vicissitudes of modern capitalism and help the nation deliver its promise of liberty, equality, and prosperity to all people. This idea was and is at the core of modern American liberalism. It is what liberals themselves, from the Progressive Era through the New Deal, from the post–World War II decades to the present day, have labored to convince their fellow Americans is true.

This commitment to an activist centralized state rests on the idea that political decisions – not markets or happenstance – create economic and social reality. If there is a core belief of the modern liberal conscience, this is it. Modern liberals have refused to believe that human beings are at the mercy of forces beyond their control. The marketplace, poverty, God, nature, disease, war – these things do not control our lives to the degree that traditional conservatives believed; they are rather surmountable and controllable. Maybe not now, maybe not completely, but progress has meant overcoming these seemingly natural and eternal obstacles to human potential and human dignity. In the late nineteenth century,

when industrialization created social chaos and threatened the republic, American conservatives held ever more firmly to their belief in individualism and limited government. Liberals, on the other hand, known then as Progressives, urged Americans to confront these chaotic forces with the organized power of the state. Through the judicious use of government, Progressives argued, Americans could control change and reap its benefits. Government did not have to be merely a policing agent; it could be a facilitator that worked for the benefit of all its citizens, a “provider of civilizing opportunities,” as Walter Lippman put it, procuring for its citizens schools, sewers, roads, universities, information, medical attention, and parks. Such state-provided services *promoted* individual aspirations and opportunities. During the Great Depression, liberals again refused to be captive to economic cycles and attempted to use the state to gain control over the market – something the business community actually welcomed, which was why so much of it supported the New Deal.⁸

In trying to convince their fellow Americans that the state – the federal government – could play a positive role in shaping society, Progressives and New Dealers put forth two arguments. The first was Lockean, designed to assure Americans that liberal reformers were still concerned about individual liberty. This argument said that instability, inequality, and poverty threatened the legitimacy of the state that protects one’s property. To avert revolution from below or tyranny from above, both of which threatened individual liberty, the liberal state needed to reform social conditions and economic practices.⁹

But Progressives and New Dealers also made another more modern argument based on the tenets of the new social sciences. This argument rejected the idea that atomistic, rational individuals were the basis of society and proposed instead that people were fundamentally social and that overlapping and interdependent groups – social class, ethnicity, region, professional associations, and, later, race and gender – were a better indicator of their interests, loyalties, and behavior than individual self-interest. By 1950 this view was a natural, basic truth of political science, as indicated by Malcolm Moos’s proclamation in a textbook that “The basic concept for understanding the dynamics of government is the multi-group nature of modern society.”¹⁰ Under this group-oriented, sociological view of society, the state’s purpose was still to protect private property and national security, but in addition it was also to act as referee, balancing the interests, rights, and privileges of different groups in the name of social stability and the common good.¹¹ Political scientists labeled this idea “liberal pluralism” or “interest-group pluralism.”¹²

At the core of the New Deal was a pluralist vision of the modern administrative state as one that balanced and integrated the interests of different groups to form a productive, harmonious, efficient whole. As one political science instructor told his students: “Society consists of a multitude of social forces which pull in every direction, the balancer of these forces, giving it direction, energy is the state.”¹³ The job of balancing and integrating competing groups into a harmonious whole meant a more active role for the federal state. It required the expansion of government offices to collect data about the different groups; it meant the federal regulation of some groups to help others (such as child labor laws or, later, minimum wage laws, which regulated employers); it meant the provision of social services for some groups at the expense of others (via taxation and subsidies). At the same time, however, the state’s role was purely integrative, not directive; this was not socialism. Pluralism privileged the political process over the efficiency of a strong state; indeed pluralism, as James Madison had long ago pointed out, would prevent the dominance of any one group or leader.

Pluralism made the group, not the individual, the salient feature of modern democratic, political life. Democracy was not about each individual pursuing his or her own interests but rather the process by which groups negotiated, compromised, and formed coalitions within a party system to further their interests. This theory affirmed New Dealers’ repudiation of both “rugged individualism” and limited government. Its emphasis on the group and society also jibed with the ideology of the New Deal’s most influential and enthusiastic constituency, the labor movement, which was based on the simple precept that by acting collectively, within unions, men and women could attain that which they could not attain as individuals.

Like Progressives and New Dealers before them, post–World War II liberals embraced these ideas about the group-based nature of society and the integrative role of the federal government, ideas that weren’t considered “liberal,” per se, but rather modern. Like their predecessors, post–World War II liberals believed that the growth of the state was not an ideological position but rather a fact of history, the natural evolution of modern, industrialized society. As societies became more complex, more interdependent, they required a more highly centralized government to coordinate all of the competing and overlapping group interests. Local government had been fine when markets were local. State governments had been fine when politics were regional. But the Depression had shown that the problems that beset the nation were national and even

international in scope; the war had proven what the organized power of the state could accomplish. There was no going back to a world of limited government and “rugged individualism,” which was, in the eyes of liberals, not a competing ideology but rather a temporal incongruity. Laissez-faire belonged to a different time.

This at least is what liberals such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., J. K. Galbraith, Stuart Chase, Reinhold Niebuhr, Walter Lippmann, and many others, argued. Their articles, books, speeches, and editorials, as well as their advice to those in positions of influence, helped make this liberal pluralist understanding of state and society the norm in American political discourse and marginalized the conservative alternatives. Such proselytizing was as much a part of the liberal agenda as the enactment of specific programs. The prevalence of their ideas in the journals of the Luce press empire (*Time*, *Fortune*, *Life*), in major newspapers (*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*), in political science and sociology textbooks, in college curricula, on network news, among corporate leaders, and in the Republican Party suggests that in this endeavor anyway liberals were extraordinarily successful.¹⁴ As Hodgson writes, “Not only in Washington but in the press, on television, and – with few exceptions – in the academic community, to dissent from the broad axioms of consensus was to proclaim oneself irresponsible or ignorant.”¹⁵

Despite liberals’ success in embedding their ideas in a new mainstream, most historians have argued that the type of liberalism they peddled wasn’t actually that liberal, at least compared to what liberalism had looked like in the 1930s, or even right after the war. Liberalism, they tell us, had once been more adventurous, more expansive, more critical of capitalism, more accepting of Communism, and hence better able to deliver on promises of social democracy. These historians identified “an untaken path,” a more radical, grassroots alternative that was based in the labor movement and that endorsed real economic planning and a more comprehensive European-style cradle-to-grave welfare system. But that vision, they argue, was squelched by postwar liberals, whose anticommunism, support for the Cold War, and rejection of class-based politics made them, essentially, conservatives. These historians portrayed postwar liberals, dubbed “Cold War liberals,” as fundamentally different from these earlier, presumably more radical liberals.¹⁶

Postwar liberals *were* different from their 1930s counterparts, as they themselves never tired of pointing out. They no longer believed that Communism had anything to offer humanity; they no longer believed that class struggle was the engine of history or the basis of politics.

Postwar liberals were – for a little while, anyway – realists. They had a darker view of humanity; they were less optimistic about humans’ ability to end all war, all suffering, and all inequality. They were critical of the soft sentimentality of those progressives – Schlesinger called them “doughfaces” – who still believed in human perfectibility and world peace and whose self-righteous commitment to pure principles kept them away from politics, compromise, and all forms of power. Postwar liberals understood that people – and hence politics – were not always governed by wisdom and tolerance, but more often by passion and prejudice and dogma. Those who wanted to bring about real democratic progress had to do so in a world that was fundamentally irrational, sinful, and governed by the will to power. This realism is reflected in the titles of their books: Niebuhr’s *Children of Light, Children of Darkness* and *Moral Man and Immoral Society*; Fiedler’s *An End to Innocence*; Schlesinger’s *The Vital Center*. It is also reflected in their reluctant acceptance of Truman’s “get tough” foreign policy against the Soviet Union. As liberals, they were wary of Truman’s reliance on unilateral military solutions, but they also understood that Soviet aggression would not be stopped by negotiation or the United Nations.

Postwar liberals accepted capitalism. They sought not to transform the political-economic structure but rather to work through it to make sure that it worked for all people, not just the powerful. They hoped that economic growth would create enough wealth “to raise all boats” and alleviate the poverty that limited peoples’ opportunities. They embraced Keynesian policies to maintain economic growth, rejecting more socialistic, or statist, interventions into the economy, such as nationalization of major industries, national healthcare service, or state-planning.¹⁷ They sought to convince corporate leaders to work with the state rather than against it, encouraging them to be socially responsible, to see themselves as partners with the government in a program for prosperity. They rejected the Marxian view that labor unions were the vanguard of history and saw labor as just another interest group competing for the largesse of the federal government. They fully supported labor – indeed, they depended on it for their political power – but it held no transcendent significance, no prophecy for mankind.

It is true that postwar liberals were wary, even critical, of excessive state power, which they felt could lead to totalitarianism. Schlesinger warned of the “total planner,” writing in *The Vital Center* that the state “should create an economic environment favorable to private business policies which increase production; and then let the free market carry the

ball as far as it can.”¹⁸ Some historians have used this wariness to suggest that postwar liberals were essentially free market conservatives.¹⁹ They were not. In fact, they used the specter of totalitarianism to make the case for a welfare state and Keynesian spending. The best way to avoid totalitarianism, they argued, was to expand New Deal type programs such as the GI Bill, FHA loans, fair employment, minimum wage, unemployment insurance, and social security, which spread the wealth and gave working class Americans a stake in society. Indeed, this argument – that government welfare programs were an inoculation against Communism and totalitarianism – helped win over moderate Republicans and corporate leaders (described in Chapters 2 and 3), to form the liberal consensus.

So yes, postwar liberals were different in many ways from their counterparts of the 1930s. But they were still liberals. Rather than emphasizing what separated them from earlier, presumably more radical liberals, I have focused on what united them: a belief in using state power for social ends, a rejection of “rugged individualism,” and a group-based conception of society.

That postwar liberals were in fact liberal becomes clear when viewed from the perspective of their true political foes – modern conservatives. Conservatives such as William F. Buckley, Jr., and James Burnham looked with horror upon the new consensus. They rejected the welfare state; they rejected the idea that groups were the basis of society. They saw containment as a weak, defensive, “pro-Communist” strategy and Eisenhower’s willingness to negotiate with Soviet leaders as a moral failing.²⁰

American conservatives saw the 1950s as their time in the wilderness, an era of liberal ascendancy, a time when traditional ideas about the individual and limited government were marginalized. Historians have often scoffed at this claim, pointing out the rampant anticommunism, the ubiquitous rhetoric about the “American Way” and free enterprise, the postwar resurgence of anti-unionism, the conformity. But in fact, the views of real conservatives, such as Senator Robert Taft and publisher William F. Buckley, constituted a minority position among both the American public and opinion-makers. A 1957 poll from Opinion Research Corporation showed that 83 percent of Americans approved of President Eisenhower’s expansion of Social Security, 86 percent approved of his highway program, 86 percent approved of his efforts for world peace, and fully 89 percent liked that he was keeping employment high, which he did through public works programs such as highway construction. Only 26 percent of Americans in 1957 wanted to see the Eisenhower administration become more conservative.²¹