

Leftist Threat to Freedom: Control, Coerce and Censor

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HILLSDALE, Mich.—We are living through a teachable moment. The lessons are familiar ones, but in urgent need of review.

■ The first lesson is from Ronald Reagan, the guy whom all the smart people have dismissed as passé, who taught us repeatedly, and never more memorably than when he told us that "freedom is never more than one generation from extinction." The message is that freedom is fragile, perishable, ever in need of protection. We need to remember the lesson once again.

■ The second lesson is that the principal effort to shut down American freedom today is coming from the political left in our own country. Usually, we assume that the extinction threat will come from the outside, from some dark and unblinking enemy, like the Soviet Union or China. Or that, if there is an internal threat, it surely must come from the fevered swamps of the fascist right wing.

Unleashing leftist rage

But today we find the threat coming from elements in our society that have long declared their affinity for freedom and have had a creditable record of fighting for it in years past.

The leak of a draft Supreme Court opinion, suggesting that a majority of the justices are on the verge of overturning the most controversial decision in modern history, has unleashed leftist rage and illustrated the movement's worst antidemocratic impulses.

President Joe Biden and his administration have made it clear that they will not condemn the unprecedented breach of the high court's deliberative process. Instead, they have expressed sympathy with it and are determined to capitalize on it.

Biden, who constantly calls on Americans "to prove democracy works," couldn't muster a defense of the judiciary branch.

He ignored the prolife movement's 50-year history of dignified and nonviolent protest and tenuously linked the news with his contemporary political opponents, whom he labeled the "most extreme political organization" in recent history.

Prochoice demonstrators identified and swarmed the homes of sitting justices. At least one Catholic church was vandalized.

Rising tide of intimidation

The purpose of these protests is less an exercise in free speech than an effort to destroy the independence of judges and institutions that should be protected from politics.

Of course, the men and women who run today's left all want to convince you otherwise.

When they seek to undermine institutions, shut down free speech or suppress "disinformation," they do it in the name of democracy.

What we see from the political left today is a rising tide of intimidation, coercion and censorship, epitomized by the Biden administration's creation of a Disinformation Governance Board, but also by the decision of numerous powerful and politically aligned Big Tech companies, such as Facebook, Twitter, Google and the like to disfavor or suppress speakers and viewpoints with which they disagree.

Litmus tests, branding, banning

Even the venerable American Civil Liberties Union, which once defended the right of Nazis to march through a Chicago-area neighborhood inhabited by Holocaust survivors, has caved to pressure and now uses political litmus tests in its selection of cases.

And the egregious Southern Poverty Law Center has arrogated to itself the right to brand organizations as proponents of "hate speech," and to do so with complete impunity.

Leftists celebrate Banned Books Week without any sense of irony—as if they were not the ones who are banning books today and inhibiting the expression of disapproved opinions!

They pick at the motes in others' eyes while failing to note the gigantic beam in their own. Human nature is prone to such perversity.

Any form of righteousness can turn, over time, into something very ugly. That is one lesson of the times, and it is a perennial truth.

Liberalism vs. leftism

But our particular moment is offering us an additional lesson—the difference between liberalism and leftism.

We often confuse the two, and that is a grave error.

What we are seeing before our eyes is a demonstration that, if we are to keep and cherish freedom, we must defeat the tyrannical excesses of our out-of-control left.

As a first step, we must recover the true meaning of "liberalism."

It has nothing in common with the radical Jacobinism that now seems to have taken over many formerly “liberal” circles.

Nor is it the philosophy upholding the idea of a large and ever-expanding state, directing the economy and culture with a controlling hand.

Instead, liberalism is a philosophy that affirms our freedom and our rights of conscience, one in which these fundamental liberties are taken to be inherent rights, a part of who and what we are.

These liberties are even, as our Declaration of Independence says, unalienable rights—meaning rights that cannot be taken away and cannot even be given away. And it is a philosophy that solidly supports the free exchange of ideas, not only as a right of expression but as a necessary tool for the work of self-government.

Leftists and free speech

What we should also understand is that this change is not entirely new. The progressive Left has always had a problem with free speech.

President Woodrow Wilson mounted an extensive propaganda campaign in support of the nation’s involvement in the First World War and brutally suppressed most criticism of the war effort, through measures that included the jailing and deportation of dissidents.

Ever since the 1960s, the effort to control discourse and dictate acceptable vocabulary, the practice often decried as “political correctness,” has been one of the recurrent concerns of the campus left.

Remaking utopian world

The Left’s urge for control springs from its confident belief in its capacity to remake the world in its own image—the image of a utopian world based on complete equality of condition.

Freedom is not the goal. Hence it is not sufficient for government to give individuals the freedom to speak for themselves, as classical liberalism does. Instead, those individuals must be supplied with the correct opinions and made to say the right things.

Forced to be free

They can’t be allowed to express opinions that do not support the governing powers. They must, in the chilling but sincere words of French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, be “forced to be free.”

Until the world is recreated in the Left’s image, nothing can be loved or respected simply for what it is, only for what it could be made to be.

Even at its best—and the left has often been an admirable force for good—it can never accept and love the world as it is.

Here is the core of the new puritanical ideology: The entire human past must be seen as a nightmare from whose clutches only we few have at last finally awakened.

Urge to control and remold

This is light-years removed from the generous original spirit of liberalism, which accepts people as they are, protects and values their voice in the public square, denies the authority of any party to silence them, and gives them the right to do as they please—within the limits of laws that enable their liberties rather than suppressing them.

The Left consistently reverts to the urge to control and remold. Liberalism, in its original sense, stands against that urge.

We need to affirm the second and reject the first. That is the lesson to be learned, and it is just that clear.

Can we do it? Let's hope we can.

Our future as free men and women may depend upon it.