

Left Right Confusion

To the question "Who are we, and where are we going?" a wag has answered: North Americans are the only people in the history of the world to have gone from barbarism to decadence without passing through civilization.

Events surrounding the tragic Oklahoma bombing suggest this is not far off the mark. They underline the irony of modernism, and have elicited feverish finger-pointing from media in the desperate search for a deep-culture scapegoat.

The irony lies in the fact that for the first time in world history, millions of human beings, the bulk of them North Americans, have the presumed advantages of plentiful food, high-tech toys, and rapid transportation. (Europeans here are still amazed to see the private cars of common labourers parked at job sites.) The assumption underlying this unqualified material and technological success has always been that once the masses were adequately comfortable, nations would be nice. Peaceful.

Instead, this century has been the bloodiest in history: Genocides. Gas chambers. Concentrations camps. Rapine governments. Incomprehensible arsenals of nuclear destruction that squat, barely haltered, in any nation with a few bucks to rub together. No peace.

And we are discovering that it is this same high-tech world that enables not only evil nations, but evil individuals to deliver unerring and catastrophic death at the beep of a cellular phone, or the flick of a micro-wave detonator in the trunk of a medium-priced car.

If the British writer John Gray is correct that our continent resembles politically a "civil religion," then we can expect a lot more disruption. By this phrase, he meant that for the first time in history, the settlement of this vast virgin continent offered a whole people fleeing persecution, and armed with an absolutist theological worldview, the chance to create the New Jerusalem. Civilization was to begin anew, uncorrupted.

The settlers' most passionate concern was religious freedom. They wanted the freedom to bind themselves to their preferred religion and its moral code, creating their own moral communities without governments telling them what to believe. Deeply anti-government, many died for this right.

However, as secularism spread, moral bonds weakened, leaving the old hunger for freedom intact, minus the moral restraint - the "responsibility" that President Clinton just this week said "was coupled" (past tense) to freedom. Fact is, the righteous secular elites simply decided that if there is to be no Heaven up there - why, we'll darn well make one down here, and almost any

means is worth the New Jerusalem, the perfect egalitarian society. So more equality had to mean more government. Why not?

This switch spawned a reaction, the result being that now we have not one, but two civil religions. The first has focused so much on redistributive rights to social benefits and equal outcomes that the whole ship is sinking (mostly modern leftists). The second is comprised of millions of distraught individuals - not the silent, but the silenced, majority - plunking for freedom from big government and its legal plunder, for property rights, free enterprise, family, and religious rights (mostly modern rightists). These different visions of the good society, have been a watershed of political foment from the beginning.

This distinction between modern leftists and rightists yields a further irony found in both American and Canadian history, in that the slogans of the modern so-called "right-wing" militia groups now hunkering down in America echo almost exactly - but without the elegance - the sentiments of such as Thomas Paine, America's most famous eighteenth-century "left-winger." Liberty, this highly praised democratic populist wrote ringingly, is "wholly owing to the constitution of the people, and not to the constitution of the government." So it seems the root ideas haven't changed, but the labels have.

For when both our nations were cobbled together, it was the right-wingers of old - especially the tory John A. Macdonald in Canada, and James Madison in America, who argued for strong central government. They were universally frightened of the "radicals" - the pro-democracy and therefore (by definition) "left-wingers" on both sides of the border who wanted minimal government, no taxes (at least certainly not without direct approval of the people) only direct democracy (no delegation, or representation), and strong state/provincial rights.

Such anti-government radicals saw themselves as defenders of the purest principles of democracy and the American Revolution, against all forms of foreign or national oppression, and cried out against betrayal of those principles by conservative statist who nevertheless, by a very narrow margin, did manage to impose their centralizing constitutional views on the states.

And so, quite weirdly, in America and Canada today it is the so-called "right wing" Republican Party, and the Reform Party, respectively, that are shouldering the anti-government, low tax mantle of direct popular democracy, against the liberal "left-wingers" who through universal promotion of debt-financed welfarism and centralizing big government - have ruined their own New Jerusalem.

In other words, the new right has had to take over the philosophy and methods of the old left, because the new left has become too old right. Get it?