



**DICK ARMEÝ**

Regrets . . . he's had a few . . . on the NCLB

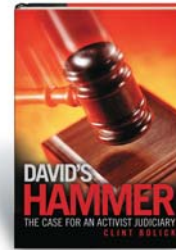
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The upside of judicial activism

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# Policy Report

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## How Prosperity Made Us More Libertarian

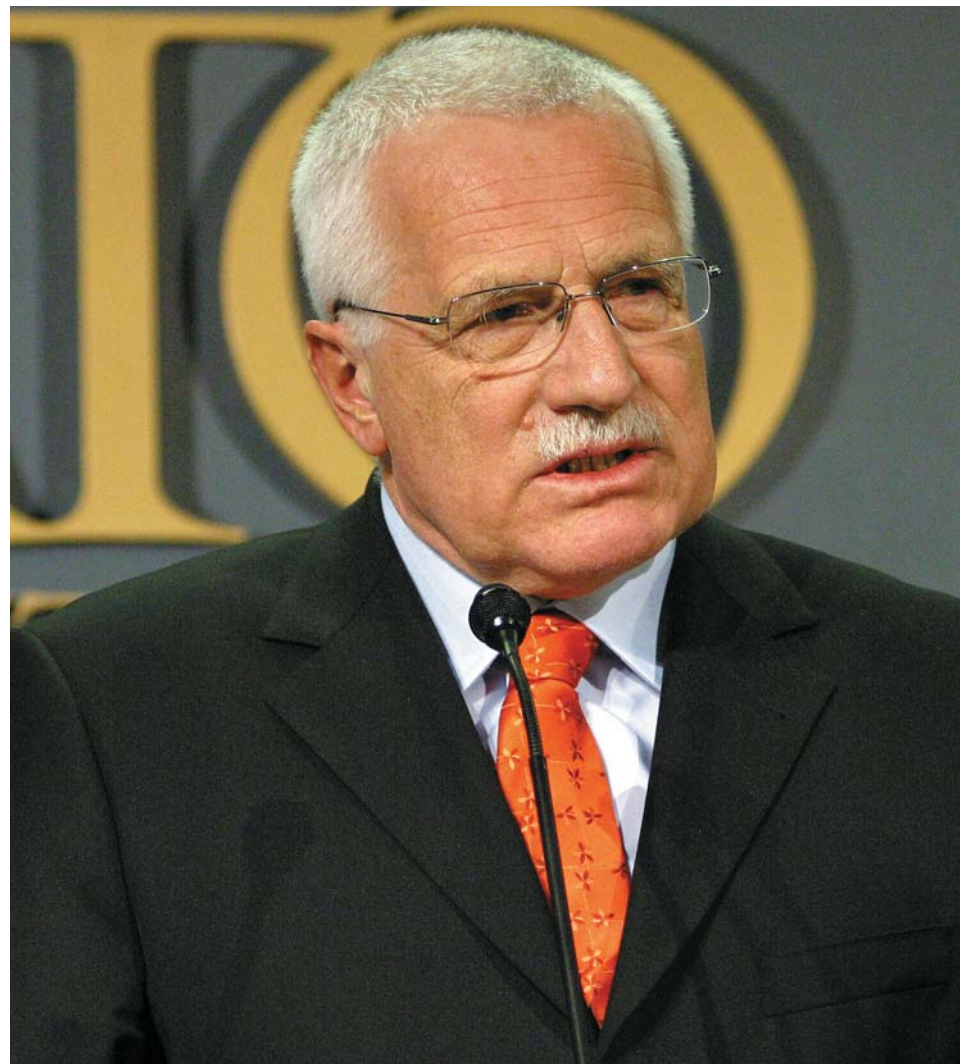
BY BRINK LINDSEY

In the years after World War II, America crossed a great historical threshold. In all prior civilizations and social orders, the vast bulk of humanity had been preoccupied with responding to basic material needs. Postwar America, however, was different. An extensive and highly complex division of labor unleashed immense productive powers far beyond anything in prior human experience. As a result, the age-old bonds of scarcity were broken. Concern with physical survival and security was now banished to the periphery of social life.

In the six decades since the end of World War II, Americans have been busy exploring the new environs of mass affluence. Those decades have witnessed both exhilarating discoveries and tragic errors, as well as a great deal of blind groping and simple muddling through. The story of postwar America is thus the story of adaptation to new social realities.

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BRINK LINDSEY is vice president for research at the Cato Institute and author of *The Age of Abundance: How Prosperity Transformed America's Politics and Culture*, just published by Collins.



Václav Klaus, president of the Czech Republic, delivered an address at the Cato Institute on March 9. Klaus's speech can be viewed at [www.cato.org](http://www.cato.org), and many of his earlier speeches are collected in a Cato Institute book, *Renaissance: The Rebirth of Liberty in the Heart of Europe*. **MORE ON PAGE 4**

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“Mass affluence did trigger a mirror-image pair of cultural convulsions on the countercultural left and on the traditionalist right.”

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At the heart of this process was a change in the basic orientation of the dominant culture: from a culture of overcoming scarcity to one of expanding and enjoying abundance. From a more rigid and repressed social system geared to achieving prosperity to a looser and more expressive one geared to taking wider advantage of prosperity's possibilities. American capitalism is derided for its superficial banality, yet it has unleashed profound, convulsive social change. Condemned as mindless materialism, it has burst loose a flood tide of spiritual yearning. The civil rights movement and the sexual revolution, environmentalism and feminism, the fitness and health care boom and the opening of the gay closet, the withering of censorship and the rise of a “creative class” of “knowledge workers”—all are the progeny of widespread prosperity.

### Questioning Authority

No one has analyzed the process of cultural reorientation more exhaustively than University of Michigan political scientist Ronald Inglehart, who for decades has been using attitude surveys to track the progress of what he calls “postmodernization.” And his research has examined cultural trends, not only in the United States, but in dozens of other countries as well. The best-documented aspect of postmodernization is a shift from “materialist” to “postmaterialist” values, in which the “emphasis on economic achievement as the top priority is now giving way to an increasing emphasis on the quality of life. In a major part of the world, the disciplined, self-denying, and achievement-oriented norms of industrial society are giving way to an increasingly broad latitude for individual choice of lifestyles and individual self-expression.”

According to Inglehart, the shift toward postmaterialist values is only one part of a broader process. Specifically, the heightened emphasis on subjective well-being as opposed to material security is highly cor-

related with a marked change in attitudes on a host of apparently unrelated issues, from adherence to traditional religion to trust in government to views on sex and sexual orientation. The central thrust of this “Postmodern shift” is a “broad de-emphasis on all forms of authority,” whether political, economic, religious, or familial. Once the quest for personal fulfillment and self-realization becomes a dominant motivation, all cultural constraints that might pose obstacles to that quest come under sustained and furious assault.

Inglehart concurs in the judgment that mass affluence is behind the sweeping cultural changes of recent decades. “This shift in worldview and motivations,” he writes, “springs from the fact that there is a fundamental difference between growing up with an awareness that survival is precarious, and growing up with the feeling that one's survival can be taken for granted.” Once material accumulation is no longer a matter of life and death, its diminished urgency naturally allows other priorities to assert themselves. “This change of direction,” Inglehart concludes, “reflects the principle of diminishing marginal utility.” Meanwhile, material security reduces stress, and thus the appeal of inflexible moral norms. “Individuals under high stress have a need for rigid, predictable rules,” Inglehart observes. “They need to be sure what is going to happen because they are in danger—their margin for error is slender and they need maximum predictability. Postmodernists embody the opposite outlook: raised under conditions of relative security, they can tolerate more ambiguity; they are less likely to need the security of absolute rigid rules that religious sanctions provide.”

The process of cultural adaptation has been anything but smooth. For his part,

Inglehart notes that the “Postmodern shift” is frequently accompanied by an “authoritarian reflex.” “Rapid change leads to severe insecurity, giving rise to a powerful need of predictability. . . .” he writes. “The reaction to change takes the form of a rejection of the new, and a compulsive insistence on the infallibility of old, familiar cultural patterns.” Commenting on the growing prominence of religious fundamentalism in the United States and elsewhere, Inglehart argues that “it is precisely because traditional social and religious norms have been eroding rapidly in these societies during recent decades that people with traditional values (who are still numerous) have been galvanized into unusually active and disruptive forms of behavior, in order to defend their threatened values.”

### Rebellions Left and Right

The juxtaposition of a Postmodern shift and an authoritarian reflex suggests a relationship of Newtonian simplicity: action and reaction, progress and backlash. Here in the United States at least, the reality has been rather more complicated. Here, mass affluence did trigger a mirror-image pair of cultural convulsions: on the countercultural left, a romantic rebellion against order and authority of every description; and on the traditionalist right, an evangelical revival of socially and theologically conservative Protestantism. Both arose around the same time, in the dizzying 1960s. Between them, these two movements have played decisive roles in shaping America's accommodation to mass affluence. But those roles cannot be fairly described as progressive and reactionary, or adaptive and obstructive. The countercultural left combined genuine liberation with dangerously antinomian excess, while the traditionalist right mixed knee-jerk reaction with wise conservation of vital cultural endowments.

The two movements thus offered conflicting half-truths. On the left were



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arrayed those elements of American society most open to the new possibilities of mass affluence and most eager to explore them—in other words, the people at the forefront of the push for civil rights, feminism, and environmentalism, as well as sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll. At the same time, however, many on the left harbored a deep antagonism toward the institutions of capitalism and middle-class life that had created all those glittering new possibilities. On the right, meanwhile, were the stalwart defenders of capitalism and middle-class mores. But included in their number were the people most repelled by and hostile to the social and cultural ferment that capitalism and middle-class mores were producing. One side attacked capitalism while rejoicing in its fruits; the other side celebrated capitalism while denouncing its fruits as poisonous.

Out of the antitheses of the Aquarian awakening and the evangelical revival came the synthesis that is emerging today. At the heart of that synthesis is a new version of middle-class morality—more sober, to be sure, than the wild and crazy days of “if it feels good, do it,” but far removed from old-style bourgeois starchiness or even the genial conformism of the early postwar years. Core commitments to family, work, and country remain strong, but they are tempered by broadminded tolerance of the country’s diversity and a deep humility about telling others how they should live. “Above all moderate in their outlook on the world,” summarized sociologist Alan Wolfe in *One Nation, After All*, “they believe in the importance of living a virtuous life but are reluctant to impose values they understand as virtuous for themselves on others; strong believers in morality, they do not want to be considered moralists.”

Liberal attitudes on race and the role of women in society have now become subjects of overwhelming consensus. Consider interracial dating, once among the most ferociously enforced of taboos. According to a 2003 survey, 77 percent of Americans

agreed with the proposition, “I think it’s all right for blacks and whites to date each other,” up from 48 percent in 1987. Even 59 percent of Southerners agreed—a remarkable transformation. Meanwhile, as of 1998, 82 percent of Americans approved of married women working outside the home—with less than a percentage point of difference between male and female responses.

### Live and Let Live

And while most Americans still reject the notion that homosexuality is normal, they nonetheless are willing to live and let live. Over 50 percent of respondents in a 2001 survey continued to hold that homosexual sex is always wrong, though the figure has declined from more than 70 percent in the early 1970s. Nevertheless, some 9 in 10 Americans endorsed equal job opportunities for gays and lesbians as of 2003; over 60 percent extended that endorsement to include teaching positions in elementary schools. Meanwhile, a 2005 poll found that supporters of gay marriage or civil unions outnumbered opponents, 48 percent to 44 percent.

Progressive attitudes on race and sex have been bolstered by new and strict rules of etiquette. Ethnic jokes, once a staple of American humor, are now considered bad manners or worse. Goatish behavior in the workplace is proscribed by strict rules against sexual harassment. “Homophobia” is zealously guarded against. Although the aversion to giving offense is a creditable one, it has veered all too frequently into killjoy puritanism, as exemplified by the widely noted absurdities of “political correctness.” Overzealous moralism and humorless busybodyness are abiding American temptations; today they are simply being indulged in on behalf of new

causes. Notwithstanding the excesses, the fact that certain forms of casual bigotry are no longer quite so casual must be regarded as a genuine improvement.

These deep bows toward the influence of Aquarius, while highly significant, are nonetheless highly selective. On issues of crime and punishment, for instance, Americans continue to support a hard line. A 2003 survey found that 65 percent of respondents thought the criminal justice system wasn’t tough enough, while 26 percent thought it was about right. Only 6 percent said it was too tough. Capital punishment still enjoys strong support, as 74 percent of those answering a 2005 poll favored the death penalty in cases of murder. Enthusiasm for vigorous law enforcement is matched by a strong belief in the right to self-defense. Asked whether they favored a ban on private ownership of handguns, 63 percent of Americans responding to a 2004 survey said no. Moderate restrictions on gun ownership, however, do command majority support.

Although the principle is often honored in the breach, Americans in overwhelming numbers recognize the importance of two-parent families. A 1996 survey showed that 86 percent of Americans regarded out-of-wedlock births as a very serious or critical problem; in that same survey, 81 percent said that divorces involving parents with small children are a problem of equal severity. Meanwhile, belief in the work ethic remains strong. According to a 1994 survey, 74 percent of Americans still believe that “if you work hard you can get ahead—reach the goals you set and more.” Along related lines, 66 percent of the participants in Alan Wolfe’s detailed study of middle-class suburbanites endorsed the statement that “the problems of America’s inner cities are largely due to people’s lack of personal responsibility for their own problems.” And though they are more alert to their country’s past and present failings than earlier generations, Americans remain unfailingly patriotic. Some 92 percent of

“What has emerged in the broad center of American public opinion is a kind of implicit libertarian synthesis.”

Wolfe's sample group said that, despite its problems, the United States is still the best place in the world to live.

## Libertarian Synthesis

What has emerged, then, in the broad center of American public opinion is a kind of implicit libertarian synthesis, one which reaffirms the core disciplines that underlie and sustain the modern lifestyle while making much greater allowances for variations within that lifestyle. Though reasonably coherent and sturdy, it remains implicit because it cuts across the ideological lines of left and right that still dominate the definition of cultural and political allegiances and discourse. Lacking affirmative articulation as a mainstream public philosophy in its own right, the libertarian synthesis operates as a largely unspoken *modus vivendi*, a compromise between the overreaching of the left and right's conflicting half-truths.

The implicit libertarian synthesis that today informs the country's cultural and political center developed, not as the successful program of a self-conscious movement, but as the accidental result of the left-right ideological conflict. Unsurprisingly, that synthesis is therefore hardly a model of consistency. Widespread economic illiteracy and lobbying by vested interests weaken public support for rough-and-tumble market competition, especially when the competitors are “too big” (e.g., Microsoft, Wal-Mart, oil companies) or, worse yet, foreigners. The bloated middle-class entitlement programs, Social Security and Medicare, remain highly popular despite (or, perhaps, precisely because of) their fiscal unsustainability. And the quixotic “war on drugs” continues to enjoy broad public backing.

Nevertheless, in its broad outlines at least, centrist public opinion comports reasonably well with the reflexive libertarianism often described as “fiscally conservative, socially liberal.” And contrary to all the recent talk about a highly polarized electorate divided into right-wing “red”

states and left-wing “blue” states, the fact is that a purplish centrism is culturally and politically dominant in America today. According to 2004 survey data, 66 percent of Americans consider themselves either moderate, slightly conservative, or slightly liberal. By contrast, only 21 percent label themselves conservative or extremely conservative, while a mere 13 percent call themselves liberal or extremely liberal. Meanwhile, the divide between red and blue states, while real, is hardly dramatic. Survey data from 2000 showed that self-identified conservatives comprised 31 percent of voters in red states (i.e., states won by Bush in the 2000 election) and 24 percent of voters in blue states (i.e., states won by Gore); liberals constituted 11 percent of red-state voters and 20 percent of blue-state voters.

Nonideological moderation between the left and right's opposing claims thus dwarfs the committed partisanship of either flank. Here is the nub of the matter: America is an exuberantly commercial and intensely competitive society, a fact of which true believers on the left sternly disapprove; it is, simultaneously and not unrelatedly, an exuberantly secular and intensely hedonistic society, to the deep chagrin of true believers on the right. America is the way it is because the vast majority of Americans choose to make it that way, so it should come as no great shock that excessively vigorous condemnation of the contemporary American way of life meets with broad public disfavor. Ideologues, who define themselves by their dissent from America's prevailing cultural synthesis, must temper that dissent in their public pronouncements or face marginalization.

## The Realm of Freedom

None of which is meant to imply that ideological conflict is not real. It is all too real, and all too rancorous. But, in the end,

it has proved inconclusive. Despite their best efforts, both sides have failed to capture the prize of the great unconverted middle. Moreover, in attempting to do so, both sides have made key concessions along the way, so that the very definitions of left and right have shifted toward the cultural center. Today's typical red-state conservative is considerably bluer on race relations, the role of women, and sexual morality than his predecessor of a generation ago. Likewise, the typical blue-state liberal is considerably redder than his predecessor when it comes to the importance of markets to economic growth, the virtues of the two-parent family, and the morality of American geopolitical power.

Alas, ideological categories have not yet caught up with social realities. As a result, the new world we have been creating does not yet appear on the political map. And, therefore, the path of progress through the realm of freedom's vast, alluring, and treacherous landscape remains obscure to our blinkered vision.

For a new political movement to offer a viable alternative to the prevailing ideologies, it would need to start with forthright affirmation of the libertarian cultural synthesis—and equally forthright rejection of the left and right's illiberal baggage. A movement so grounded would probably not yield an explicitly libertarian politics, since it would need to include constituencies that incline toward more activist government. More likely, it would articulate an intellectual common ground shared by small-government conservatives, libertarians, and pro-market liberals.

At present, no viable hybrid of this or any other description exists or even appears to be germinating. For the time being, then, we are stuck with the continuing battle of half-truths. But comparing our situation with that in most other countries, it is difficult to summon up too much self-pity.

*From The Age of Abundance: How Prosperity Transformed America's Politics and Culture by Brink Lindsey. © 2007 by Brink Lindsey. By permission of HarperCollins Publishers.*