

* * * * *
* * ! * ! * ! * ! * * !
* * ! THE BOARD LIGHTS UP ! * *
by Robert Beum

Suddenly everyone brightens and laughs Yes!
and cheers him—he wins, we win. Just being here!
And God so loved the pinball universe . . .
Dazzle of being here! There may be more.

At a Disco
by Robert Beum

Gyrating on my own? Might be a dance
for someone savaged. Give this boy a step
as slow, as close, as what you'd like to last
like music making gold and silver warm.

An Upstairs
by Robert Beum

They'd built that house up to the sun and moon.
We opened windows and the stars fell in
with all-night stories—who'd not stay awake
to hear star children beat the levelling years?

by Joseph Sobran

On Being "Right Wing"

As I write these words, just after the November 7 elections, liberal Democrats are enjoying a well-earned gloat on their victory over the right wing. Just one question: What does *right wing* mean?

I've puzzled over this question for years. I've also posed it to liberals, who can't really answer it. They apply this term, always censorious, to anarchists, who want no government at all, and to fascists, who want government without limits. Also to conservatives, who want government defined and limited.

Monarchism, it seems, is right wing; so is libertarianism. So are theocracy, Ayn Rand's atheistic objectivism, states'-rights constitutionalism, federalism, plutocracy, oligarchy, militarism, "isolationism," neoconservatism, feudalism, *laissez-faire* capitalism, classical liberalism, racialism, antisemitism (but also Zionism), "McCarthyism," some forms of populism, most forms of nationalism, all forms of anticommunism—just about everything, it seems, but socialism and, perhaps, nudism. Such causes as Prohibitionism, Clinton-hating, and opposition to abortion are also right wing. The term is worse than indefinable; it is simply incoherent.

The left-wing paradigm is pretty simple: communism. True, there are sectarian splits on the left—Bolsheviks *versus* Mensheviks, Stalinists *versus* Trotskyites—but these aren't disputes over basic principles. Liberals are just piecemeal socialists, pursuing the agenda more gradually than Reds, maybe, but it's the same agenda.

Consider feminism. Such feminist leaders as Betty Friedan, Bella Abzug, and Susan Brownmiller, for example, started out as commies. I once called feminism "the ladies' auxiliary of socialism," and I still think of it that way. Everything is the state's business, after all, so feminists can favor "choice" in abortion without really objecting to forced abortion in Red China. If China has a "population problem" (and, to the left, population is always a problem for the state), well, abortion is, naturally, one solution. Voluntary or compulsory? That's a detail, a matter of "policy."

But what is the common denominator of all the things liberals censure as right wing? A logician would have difficulty

specifying it. Maybe it's not a property, but an attitude. Anyone who opposes socialism for any reason is *ipso facto* "right wing," and, of course, that's bad. Which is to say, *right wing* means whatever liberals dislike.

Now, you'll notice I'm using a rather quaint vocabulary here, the almost-obsolete language of definite creeds and principles. Liberals, especially in America, shy away from such explicit avowals. They prefer to divide things into the moralistic categories of *progressive* and *reactionary*, but these terms raise their own questions. What does the "progressive" progress toward?

Why, toward socialism, of course! That wasn't so hard, was it? And the "reactionary" resists progress. Scratch the liberal's exasperating evasiveness, and this is what it all comes to. He instinctively doesn't want us to know what he's talking about. In fact, and this both excuses and aggravates his fault, he doesn't want to know it himself.

Government, George Washington is supposed to have said, is neither reason nor persuasion, but force. The more government we have, the greater the ratio of force to freedom; this is almost self-evident. Every new law is at once a demand for obedience and a threat of punishment. Yet it rarely occurs to the liberal; for him, no matter how big and powerful the state gets, there is hardly such a thing as too much government, or even enough. There is no point at which he feels that his dreams have finally come true, that the time has come not to make even more laws but to repeal some.

Such simple, philosophically obvious thoughts, needless to say, will strike the liberal as "right wing." In a strange sense, he is extremely conservative. It just doesn't cross his mind that the modern state may be fundamentally deranged; he feels entirely at home in it. He is anything but a critical Socrates where government is concerned. Quite the contrary.

And despite his curious reputation as an opponent of war, the liberal accepts the necessity and legacies of past wars, especially the U.S. Civil War and World War II, and he regards Presidents Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt as heroic,



virtually sacred figures. He not only pardons but celebrates the lies and crimes by which they induced and conducted those extremely bloody wars. After all, both conflicts helped to create the monolithic Leviathan state to which he is attached. How could they have been wrong?

Liberalism has made it difficult to think or speak lucidly about the modern state. Its devious semantics protect that state's totalitarian presuppositions from exposure and scrutiny, planting the assumption that any form of opposition to the growth of the state is retrograde, "reactionary." This is what makes so many disparate, mutually incompatible things "right wing" in the liberal mind.

The astute reader will have noticed an anomaly in this account. Though liberals have designated neoconservatives as right wing, such neocons as Charles Krauthammer and William Bennett have accused more traditional conservatives of "fascism." I'm far from the first to suggest that most of the neocons are essentially liberals rather than genuine conservatives, and I think this hostility to the so-called Old Right clinches the point. What is remarkable is that these people nevertheless covet the conservative label. And what is deplorable is that they have been allowed to usurp it in such formerly conservative precincts as *National Review*.

Which brings me back to the recent elections. The Republican rout may perhaps be seen as a referendum on neoconservatism—or, more precisely, on what happens when that ideology is substituted for the real thing. If *this* is conservatism, the voters said, maybe liberalism deserves another chance.

In some respects, the Democrats now seem more conservative than the Republicans. Whether this will turn out to be a tragedy for conservatism, or an opportunity for recovery, remains to be seen. ◀