Liberalism after 9/11: E. J. Dionne on what's right about the left

Cover Story in the August 24, 2004 issue

For the past decade E. J. Dionne has written a column on politics for the Washington Post *that has been syndicated to more than 90 other newspapers. An unabashedly liberal Catholic, Dionne has trenchantly analyzed the policies and strategies of left and right while calling for a revival of progressive politics in the tradition of FDR's New Deal.*

Dionne, who is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, has taken a special interest in the place of religion in politics, chairing the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and editing (with John DiIulio Jr.) What's God Got to Do with the American Experiment? *(2000). His 1991 book* Why Americans Hate Politics *was nominated for a National Book Award.*

Dionne's latest book, Stand Up and Fight Back: Republican Toughs, Democratic Wimps and the Politics of Revenge *(Simon & Schuster), describes the partisan tone of politics in recent years and the failures of liberals to press their concerns forcefully or persuasively. We spoke with him about the political landscape and political possibilities.*

You suggest in your recent book that the language of political discussion has shifted to the right in recent years. Can you give some examples?

The largest sign of this shift is the invocation of market language to justify almost everything. Market language has displaced moral language. The example I cite in the book is from Ann Lewis, who used to work at the Clinton White House. She said, "We used to call for immunizing little children against disease. Now we call for investments in human capital." She was poking fun at this language, but her point was serious: if even immunizing kids has to be defended through market language, the progressive idea is in deep trouble. Progressives begin to sound like people who are afraid of their own moral arguments.

A second example is the way in which progressives, especially Democratic politicians, have been reluctant to defend government's legitimate role. Recall President Clinton's declaration that the era of big government is over. Well, if you're in favor of Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, environmental protection, a strong Securities and Exchange Commission and a whole lot of other things, including national defense, you are already for a pretty big government. By pretending that you're not, you're being untrue to yourself and you're not framing the right kind of argument. The proper argument is not an abstract debate over the size of government but a debate over how much government we want and need, whose side government is on and what interests government serves.

A third shift in language is evident in the constant effort by progressives to sound tough. There's a point to this effort, because liberalism has never been the same since Humphrey Bogart was replaced by Woody Allen and Alan Alda as the symbol of what it means to be a liberal. Bogart was a symbol of a kind of tough liberalism rooted as much in solidarity as in kindness or compassion. There's nothing wrong with kindess and compassion, but solidarity is a stronger virtue.

As soon as liberals enter an argument about toughness, they lose. If the one side says, "You're soft," and you say, "No, I'm not," the argument's over before it begins.

When liberals seek to talk about whose interests government should serve, they can expect to hear conservatives complain that they are fomenting "class warfare."

Whenever somebody yells "class warfare," it's important to ask who began the war. Is it class warfare to point out that a tax program is tilted toward the very wealthy? Is the tax program itself a symbol of class warfare?

The great sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset once referred to free elections in democracies as the playing out of the democratic class struggle. There are interests at stake in elections.

Conservatives never tire of playing class warfare on culture issues. They try to argue that liberals are out of touch or are elitists. Why should one side be able to do this on cultural issues while the other side is prohibited from raising the same question on matters of economic interest?

A recent poll indicated that the more often you go to church (or synagogue or mosque) the more likely you are to vote Republican. Those who rarely or never attend services are more likely to vote Democratic. That's pretty disturbing news for Democrats who want to appeal to religious people.

It is. But those numbers can be exaggerated. People tend to focus on the far ends of the spectrum. Sure, very secular people tend to be Democratic. People who attend religious services more than once a week tend to be Republican—in both cases by about a two-to-one margin.

But there's a vast number of Americans who go to church once a week or several times a month and who still think of themselves as religious people. Among this group the differences are narrower. Among the weekly attenders Republicans have roughly a five-to-four edge. Among the less than weekly attenders Democrats have about a five-to-four edge.

Another way to look at this issue is to note that there are two swing religious groups—Catholics and mainline Protestants. We know that white evangelical Christians are, on the whole, Republican, and that African-American Christians of all stripes are strongly Democratic. Mainline Protestants have become less Republican than they used to be, and Roman Catholics have become less Democratic.

There's another swing group that some people are talking about—what Amy Sullivan, a former colleague at the Pew Forum, calls "freestyle evangelicals." These are evangelicals who don't fit the Republican mold.

You've been very critical of President Bush for failing to build on the sense of national unity after 9/11. Why so?

For about four months after 9/11 the country was extraordinarily united. It wasn't simply a case of people playing politics by not seeming to play politics. There actually was a broad consensus in Congress for the post-9/11 spending bills, and there was a broad consensus in the country that the war in Afghanistan was a just war. The president himself shifted his language from unilateralism to something that sounded much more like an endorsement of international cooperation. If Bush had stayed on that path, he could have kept the country united and, I believe, created a sustainable Republican majority.

Instead, he turned in 2002 to using national security issues—particularly the bill creating a Homeland Security Department and the debate over Iraq—to win an election and to bludgeon Democrats. This created deep resentments among Democrats. In my lifetime I've never seen Democrats as united as they are now. Anger, for better or worse, often does that.

Why did that shift take place? Was it a matter of Bush returning to fundamental conservative convictions or listening to political advisers on how to exploit the situation for electoral victory?

I've always thought that Bush was more conservative than his rhetoric in the 2000 election suggested. For example, he was quite explicit before he was elected about supporting a big tax cut and the partial privatization of Social Security.

His specific stands received less attention than his brilliant use of "compassionate conservative" language to take the hard edges off his views.

It's worth noting that even compassionate conservatism, when examined carefully, was not about supporting anything like traditional government programs. It was much more about helping individuals to overcome their own disabilities—drug and alcohol addiction and the like. It was much more about individual disabilities than about social justice. So you could argue that compassionate conservatism was, as it were, more "conservative" at heart than many moderates thought it was.

Liberals often complain about the conservatives' dominance of the media. Is that legitimate?

The successes of the right with the media came from very intense organizing and a two-pronged strategy. First, beginning in the period after the 1964 Goldwater campaign, they assailed as liberal every media institution that was not conservative. That served to push the media steadily to the right, certainly from where they were 40 years ago.

At the same time, conservatives set up their own media institutions—like Rush Limbaugh's program and those of his imitators on AM radio and Fox News on TV. The Fox effect pushed other parts of the cable news business to the right. There is almost no one on the left side who speaks unchallenged on his or her own program the way, say, Bill O'Reilly of Fox News does on his.

An interesting twist to this development is that the very secularism that conservatives attack in the media oddly serves to identify religion with the right. If you believe that religion lives on the right, and you are booking a television program, then when you look for an authentic “religious voice” you’re probably going to find a conservative one. That automatically leaves out a very large segment of religious America. In this way, a certain style of liberalism in the media ends up unconsciously working against liberalism—it bolsters a stereotype about religious people that in the end harms liberalism and ignores a large part of the religious community.

What issues could a center-left coalition effectively articulate?

The most effective speech anyone has given in this election year is John Edwards’s “Two Americas” speech. It was powerful because it articulated the feeling that the political battle in our nation is not between the rich and poor but between the very privileged and everyone else. Are there two governments, one for the very powerful and one for everyone else? Are there two economies, one for the very powerful and one for everyone else? The issue of basic equality is one around which center and left can agree.

For example, moderates and progressives may disagree about how to obtain universal health coverage. Progressives might want a Canadian-style single-payer system; moderate people might want to fiddle more with market incentives. But they agree that this is a problem that needs to be addressed, and that government will play a large role in addressing it. There are a series of other problems—whether in health care or child care or the minimum wage—where moderates and the left may disagree on means but agree on the importance of action.

At the end of the book I talk about what I call progressive patriotism as a logical response to 9/11. A progressive patriotism would take us back to that tougher, Bogart-style liberalism, rooted in solidarity. If the solidarity we felt after 9/11 was authentic—and I think it was—then it shouldn’t be confined to solidarity in the face of a dangerous enemy. There was much broader fellow feeling after 9/11, a feeling that it didn’t matter in those buildings whether you were an investment banker or a janitor—everybody was at risk, we are all in this together, and we have a responsibility to each other. It’s that feeling—and the idea behind the feeling—that liberals need to articulate.