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The Case Against Liberal Compassion

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Mean-Spirited Diatribe Against Liberal Compassion.

The following is adapted from a speech delivered at Hillsdale College on October 9, 2014, sponsored by the College's Van Andel Graduate School of Statesmanship.

Four years ago I wrote a book about modern American liberalism: *Never Enough: America's Limitless Welfare State*. It addressed the fact that America's welfare state has been growing steadily for almost a century, and is now much bigger than it was at the start of the New Deal in 1932, or at the beginning of the Great Society in 1964. In 2013 the federal government spent \$2.279 trillion—\$7,200 per American, two-thirds of all federal outlays, and 14 percent of the Gross Domestic Product—on the five big program areas that make up our welfare state: 1. Social Security; 2. All other income support programs, such as disability insurance or unemployment compensation; 3. Medicare; 4. All other health programs, such as Medicaid; and 5. All programs for education, job training, and social services.

That amount has increased steadily, under Democrats and Republicans, during booms and recessions. Adjusted for inflation and population growth, federal welfare state spending was 58 percent larger in 1993 when Bill Clinton became president than it had been 16 years before when Jimmy Carter took the oath of office. By 2009, when Barack Obama was inaugurated, it was 59 percent larger than it had been in 1993.

Overall, the outlays were more than two-and-a-half times as large in 2013 as they had been in 1977. The latest Census Bureau data, from 2011, regarding state and local programs for “social services and income maintenance,” show additional spending of \$728 billion beyond the federal amount. Thus the total works out to some \$3 trillion for all government welfare state expenditures in the U.S., or just under \$10,000 per American. That figure does not include the cost, considerable but harder to reckon, of the policies meant to enhance welfare without the government first borrowing or taxing money and then spending it. I refer to laws and regulations that require some citizens to help others directly, such as minimum wages, maximum hours, and mandatory benefits for employees, or rent control for tenants.

All along, while the welfare state was growing constantly, liberals were insisting constantly it wasn’t big enough or growing fast enough. So I wondered, five years ago, whether there is a Platonic ideal when it comes to the size of the welfare state—whether there is a point at which the welfare state has all the money, programs, personnel, and political support it needs, thereby rendering any further additions pointless. The answer, I concluded, is that there is no answer—the welfare state is a permanent work-in-progress, and its liberal advocates believe that however many resources it has, it always needs a great deal more.

The argument of *Never Enough* was correct as far as it went, but it was incomplete. It offered

an answer to two of the journalist’s standard questions: *What* is the liberal disposition regarding the growth of the welfare state? And *How* does that outlook affect politics and policy? But it did not answer another question: *Why* do liberals feel that no matter how much we’re doing through government programs to alleviate and prevent poverty, whatever we are doing is shamefully inadequate?

Mostly, my book didn’t answer that question because it never really asked or grappled with it. It showed how the Progressives of a century ago, followed by New Deal and Great Society liberals, worked to transform a republic where the government had limited duties and powers into a nation where there were no grievances the government could or should refrain from addressing, and where no means of responding to those grievances lie outside the scope of the government’s legitimate authority. This implied, at least, an answer to the question of why liberals always want the

government to do more—an answer congruent with decades of conservative warnings about how each new iteration of the liberal project is one more paving stone on the road to serfdom.

Readers could have concluded that liberals are never satisfied because they get up every morning thinking, “What can I do today to make government a little bigger, and the patch of ground where people live their lives completely unaffected by government power and benevolence a little smaller?” And maybe some liberals do that. Perhaps many do. The narrator of “The Shadow,”

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[Latin]: in the first place

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a radio drama that ran in the 1930s, would intone at the beginning of every episode, “Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?”

Well, the Shadow may have known, but I don’t. The problem with this kind of explanation for liberal statism is that very, very few liberals have been compliant or foolish enough to vindicate it with self-incriminating testimony. Maybe they’re too shrewd to admit that ever-bigger government is what they seek above all else. Or maybe they don’t realize that’s what they’re up to.

Such arguments trouble me, however. The great political philosophy professor Leo Strauss insisted that it is a grave mistake to presume to understand important political philosophers *better* than they understood themselves, unless one had already put in the hard work necessary to understand them *as* they understood themselves. Perhaps this good advice can be democratized, I thought, and applied as well to Elizabeth Warren and Rachel Maddow as to Aristotle and John Locke. If we make that effort—an effort to understand committed liberals as they understand themselves—then we have to understand them as people who, by their own account, get up every morning asking, “What can I do today so that there’s a little less suffering in the world?” To wrestle with that question, the question of liberal compassion, is the purpose of my latest book, *The Pity Party*.

Indifference to Waste and Failure

All conservatives are painfully aware that liberal activists and publicists have successfully weaponized compassion. “I am a liberal,” public radio host Garrison Keillor wrote in 2004, “and liberalism is the politics of kindness.” Last year President Obama said, “Kindness covers all of my political beliefs. When I think about what I’m fighting for, what gets me up every

single day, that captures it just about as much as anything. Kindness; empathy—that sense that I have a stake in your success; that I’m going to make sure, just because [my daughters] are doing well, that’s not enough—I want your kids to do well also.” Empathetic kindness is “what binds us together, and . . . how we’ve always moved forward, based on the idea that we have a stake in each other’s success.”

Well, if liberalism is the politics of kindness, it follows that its adversary, conservatism, is the politics of cruelty, greed, and callousness. Liberals have never been reluctant to connect those dots. In 1936 Franklin Roosevelt said, “Divine justice weighs the sins of the cold-blooded and the sins of the warm-hearted in different scales. Better the occasional faults of a government that lives in a spirit of charity than the consistent omissions of a government frozen in the ice of its own indifference.” In 1984 the Democratic Speaker of the House of Representatives, “Tip” O’Neill, called President Reagan an “evil” man “who has no care and no concern for the working class of America and the future generations. . . . He’s cold. He’s mean. He’s got ice water for blood.” A 2013 Paul Krugman column accused conservatives of taking “positive glee in inflicting further suffering on the already miserable.” They were, he wrote, “infected by an almost pathological meanspiritedness. . . . If you’re an American, and you’re down on your luck, these people don’t want to help; they want to give you an extra kick.”

Small-d democratic politics is Darwinian: Arguments and rhetoric that work—that impress voters and intimidate opponents—are used again and again. Those that prove ineffective are discarded. If conservatives had ever come up with a devastating, or even effective rebuttal to the accusation that they are heartless and meanspirited: a) anyone could recite it by now; and, b) more importantly, liberals would have long ago stopped using rhetoric about liberal kindness versus

conservative cruelty, for fear that the political risks of such language far outweighed any potential benefits. The fact that liberals are, if anything, *increasingly* disposed to frame the basic political choice before the nation in these terms suggests that conservatives have not presented an adequate response.

A first step in that direction is to note a political anomaly pointed out by Mitch Daniels, the former Republican governor of Indiana. Daniels contended that disciplining government according to “measured provable performance and effective spending” ought to be a “completely philosophically neutral objective.” Skinflint conservatives want government to be thrifty for obvious reasons, but Daniels maintained that liberals’ motivations should be even stronger. “I argue to my most liberal friends: ‘You ought to be the most offended of anybody if a dollar that could help a poor person is being squandered in some way.’ And,” the governor added slyly, “*some of them* actually agree.”

The clear implication—that many liberals are *not* especially troubled if government dollars that could help poor people are squandered—strikes me as true, interesting, and important. Given that liberals are people who: 1) have built a welfare state that is now the biggest thing government does in America; and 2) want to regard themselves and be regarded by others as compassionate empathizers determined to alleviate suffering, it *should* follow that nothing would preoccupy them more than making sure the welfare state machine is functioning at maximum efficiency. When it isn’t, after all, the sacred mission of alleviating preventable suffering is inevitably degraded.

In fact, however, liberals do *not* seem all that concerned about whether the machine they’ve built, and want to keep expanding, is running well. For inflation-adjusted, per capita federal welfare state spending to increase by 254 percent from 1977 to 2013, without a correspondingly dramatic reduction

in poverty, and for liberals to react to this phenomenon by taking the position that our welfare state’s only real defect is that it is insufficiently generous, rather than insufficiently effective, suggests a basic problem. To take a recent, vivid example, the Obama Administration had three-and-a-half years from the signing of the Affordable Care Act to the launch of the healthcare.gov website. It’s hard to reconcile the latter debacle with the image of liberals lying awake at night tormented by the thought the government should be doing more to reduce suffering. A sympathetic columnist, E.J. Dionne, wrote of the website’s crash-and-burn debut, “There’s a lesson here that liberals apparently need to learn over and over: Good intentions without proper administration can undermine even the most noble of goals.” That such an elementary lesson is one liberals need to learn over and over suggests a fundamental defect in liberalism, however—something worse than careless or inept implementation of liberal policies.

That defect, I came to think, can be explained as follows: The problem with liberalism may be that no one knows how to get the government to do the benevolent things liberals want it to do. Or it may be, at least in some cases, that it just isn’t possible for the government to bring about what liberals want it to accomplish. As the leading writers in *The Public Interest* began demonstrating almost 50 years ago, the intended, beneficial consequences of social policies are routinely overwhelmed by the unintended, harmful consequences they trigger. It may also be, as conservatives have long argued, that achieving liberal goals, no matter how humane they sound, requires kinds and degrees of government coercion fundamentally incompatible with a government created to secure citizens’ inalienable rights, and deriving its just powers from the consent of the governed.

I don’t reject any of those possibilities, or deny the evidence and logic adduced in support of each. But my assessment of how the liberal project has

been justified in words, and rendered in deeds, leads me to a different explanation for why, under the auspices of liberal government, things have a way of turning out so badly. I conclude that the machinery created by the politics of kindness doesn't work very well—in the sense of being economical, adaptable, and above all effective—because the liberals who build, operate, defend, and seek to expand this machine don't really care whether it works very well and are, on balance, happier when it fails than when it succeeds.

The Satisfaction of Pious Preening

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the Latinate word “compassion” means, literally, “suffering together with another”—it's the “feeling or emotion, when a person is moved by the suffering or distress of another, and by the desire to relieve it.” Note that suffering *together* does not mean suffering *identically*. The compassionate person does not become hungry when he meets or thinks about a hungry person, or sick in the presence of the sick. Rather, compassion means we are affected by others' suffering, a distress that motivates us to alleviate it. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote in *Emile*, “When the strength of an expansive soul makes me identify myself with my fellow, and I feel that I am, so to speak, in him, it is in order not to suffer that I do not want him to suffer. I am interested in him for love of myself.”

We can see the problem. The whole point of compassion is for empathizers to feel better when awareness of another's suffering provokes unease. But this ultimate purpose does not guarantee that empathizees will *fare* better. Barbara Oakley, co-editor of the volume *Pathological Altruism*, defines its subject as “altruism in which attempts to promote the welfare of others instead result in unanticipated harm.” Surprises and accidents happen, of course. The

pathology of pathological altruism is not the failure to salve every wound. It is, rather, the indifference—blithe, heedless, smug, or solipsistic—to the fact and consequences of those failures, just as long as the empathizer is accruing compassion points that he and others will admire. As philosophy professor David Schmitz has said, “If you're trying to prove your heart is in the right place, it isn't.”

Indeed, if you're trying to prove your heart is in the right place, the failure of government programs to alleviate suffering is not only an acceptable outcome but in many ways the preferred one. Sometimes empathizers, such as those in the “helping professions,” acquire a vested interest in the study, management, and perpetuation—as opposed to the solution and resulting disappearance—of sufferers' problems. This is why so many government programs initiated to conquer a problem end up, instead, colonizing it by building sprawling settlements where the helpers and the helped are endlessly, increasingly co-dependent. Even where there are no material benefits to addressing, without ever reducing, other people's suffering, there are vital psychic benefits for those who regard their own compassion as the central virtue that makes them good, decent, and admirable people—people whose sensitivity readily distinguishes them from mean-spirited conservatives. “Pity is about how deeply I can feel,” wrote the late political theorist Jean Bethke Elshtain. “And in order to feel this way, to experience the rush of my own pious reaction, I need victims the way an addict needs drugs.”

It follows, then, that the answer to the question of how liberals who profess to be anguished about other people's suffering can be so weirdly complacent regarding wasteful, misdirected, and above all ineffective government programs created to relieve that suffering—is that liberals care about helping much less than they care about caring. Because compassion gives me a self-regarding reason to care about your suffering, it's

more important for me to *do* something than to *accomplish* something. Once I've voted for, given a speech about, written an editorial endorsing, or held forth at a dinner party on the salutary generosity of some program to "address" your problem, my work is done, and I can feel the rush of my own pious reaction. There's no need to stick around for the complex, frustrating, mundane work of making sure the program that made *me* feel better, just by being established and praised, has actually alleviated your suffering.

This assessment also provides an answer to the question of why liberals always want a bigger welfare state. It's because the politics of kindness is about validating oneself rather than helping others, which means the proper response to suffering is always, "We need to do more," and never, "We need to do what we're already doing better and smarter." That is, liberals react to an objective reality in a distinctively perverse way. The reality is, first, that there are many instances of poverty, insecurity, and suffering in our country and, second, that public expenditures to alleviate poverty, insecurity, and suffering amount to \$3 trillion, or some \$10,000 per American, much of it spent on the many millions of Americans who are nowhere near being impoverished, insecure, or suffering. If the point of liberalism were to alleviate suffering, as opposed to preening about one's abhorrence of suffering and proud support for government programs designed to reduce it, liberals would get up every morning determined to reduce the proportion of that \$3 trillion outlay that ought to be helping the poor but is instead being squandered in some way, including by being showered on people who aren't poor. But since the real point of liberalism is to alleviate the suffering of those distressed by *others'* suffering, the hard work of making our

\$3 trillion welfare state machine work optimally is much less attractive—less gratifying—than demanding that we expand it, and condemning those who are skeptical about that expansion for their greed and cruelty.

* * *

Those of us accused of being greedy and cruel, for standing athwart the advance of liberalism and expansion of the welfare state, do have things to say, then, in response to the empathy crusaders. Compassion really is important. Clifford Orwin, a political scientist who has examined the subject painstakingly, believes our strong, spontaneous proclivity to be distressed by others' suffering confirms the ancient Greek philosophers' belief that nature intended for human beings to be friends. But compassion is neither all-important nor supremely important in morals and, especially, politics. It is nice, all things being equal, to have government officials who feel our pain rather than ones who, like imperious monarchs, cannot comprehend or do not deign to notice it. Much more than our rulers' compassion, however, we deserve their respect—for us; our rights; our capacity and responsibility to feel and heal our own pains without their ministrations; and for America's carefully constructed and heroically sustained experiment in constitutional self-government, which errs on the side of caution and republicanism by denying even the most compassionate official a monarch's plenary powers. Kindness may well cover all of Barack Obama's political beliefs, and those of many other self-satisfied, pathologically altruistic liberals.

It doesn't begin to cover all the beliefs that have sustained America's republic, however. Nor does it amount to a safe substitute for those moral virtues and political principles necessary to sustain it further. ■



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David Satter, the first Western journalist to be expelled from Russia since the end of the Cold War, is this semester's Eugene C. Pulliam Distinguished Visiting Fellow in Journalism at Hillsdale College, where he will teach a course on foreign correspondence and deliver a public lecture.