

## *The Culture War*

Why did Ronald Reagan so dismay liberals? It was not so much what he did, writes Midge Decter in *Commentary* (Mar. 1991), as what he symbolized.

*People spoke of the "Reagan Revolution," but no revolution ever came to pass . . . Still, in Ronald Reagan's case, for good and ill, it was the intention that counted. The mere articulation of each of [the] uncompleted missions of the Reagan agenda—that peculiar amalgam of old conservatism and new anti-liberalism—had set off a response in the liberal community ranging from deep confusion to panic. The reason was that the two decisive Reagan elections bore testimony not so much to a wish for radical new policies as to an open declaration of war over the culture. And a culture war, as the liberals understood far better than did their conservative opponents, is a war to the death. For a culture war is not a battle over policy, [but] rather a battle about matters of the spirit . . . The underlying and all-enveloping and finally non-negotiable issue is this: are the citizens of the United*

*States entitled, constitutionally, morally, or socially, to rights without limit, or must the rights of truly free and equal people be realized, enriched, and safeguarded by their assumption, individual as well as collective, of the very heavy responsibilities pertaining thereto? In short, are all Americans to be paid the minimal respect owing to a free people of being appropriately rewarded or penalized for their actual conduct? This is the real question at the center of the controversy between so-called conservatives and so-called liberals. It touches everything, from crime to poverty, from the schools and universities to religion and the arts; and it even affects our relations with other nations. Whether held consciously or unconsciously, the proposition at the heart of the late-20th-century American liberalism is that when it comes to rights, some individuals and groups are more "equal" than others . . . [Given] how far our society has strayed from a properly grounded, life-enhancing definition of the word freedom, the culture war is apt to be a long and bloody one.*

matic basis to the least inexperienced people might be hard to avoid."

Moreover, with so many unseasoned members, legislatures may well find themselves *more* dependent on lobbyists for information and *less* able to deal with state bureaucrats, not to mention governors.

In the end, reformers may be pursuing the wrong remedy. "It isn't just a swarm of special interests that block[s] the enactment of sound public policy," Katz writes. "[It is] also the absence of any public consensus on major issues. Term limitations wouldn't change that."

## *Isn't That Special?*

"The Rise and Fall of Special Interest Politics" by Paul E. Peterson, in *Political Science Quarterly* (Winter 1990-91), Academy of Political Science, 475 Riverside Dr., Ste. 1274, New York, N.Y. 10115-0012.

The Tax Reform Act of 1986, which eliminated a host of valuable tax loopholes, represented a defeat of the special interests that many analysts thought would never happen. Can it be that special interests have lost much of their renowned influence in Washington? Exactly, argues Peterson, a Harvard political scientist. "Special interests may have been steadily gaining in influence throughout the 1960s and 1970s," he writes, "but both during the Reagan years and during the initial

years of the Bush administration, these groups lost much of [their] clout."

Peterson has his own rather special definition of a special interest: It "consists of or is represented by a fairly small number of intense supporters who cannot expect that their cause will receive strong support . . . except under unusual circumstances." Peterson names no names, but examples might be the Consumer Bankers Association or the National Tire Dealers and Retreaders Association. Excluded

from Peterson's definition are those powerful groups—no matter how self-serving or undeserving they may be—"that can command the attention of major political figures and help shape the main political strategies of the two political parties." By this standard, for example, retirees are not a special interest.

To estimate the influence of special interests, Peterson measures the percentage of the gross national product (GNP) spent by the federal government on activities "not of paramount interest" to the two major political parties. That means all federal outlays *not* spent on the public debt, defense, benefits for the elderly, "safety net" programs for the poor, and agricultural subsidies important to the farm states (and so to the political parties battling for control of the U.S. Senate).

By this carefully defined measure, Peterson finds that the power of special interests grew substantially between 1962 and 1980, as they increased their slice of GNP from 3.6 to 5.6 percent. That increase represented three-fourths of the growth in the

whole budget. "It was a great time to be a special interest," Peterson says. During those decades, inflation kept bumping taxpayers into higher income brackets; there was a "peace dividend" after the Vietnam war ended, and Congress became "more decentralized, fragmented, policy-minded, and sensitive to constituent concerns."

But then President Ronald Reagan in his first year in office so altered "the terms of the debate that the power of special interests was transformed overnight." In 1980, special interest spending peaked at 5.6 percent of GNP; by 1989, it had fallen to 3.7 percent, about what it had been in 1962. (Total federal spending in 1989 claimed 23 percent of GNP.) The chief factors in the decline were: a major tax cut, made permanent by indexation of tax rates; the defense build-up and the increasing centralization of power over the budget, both within the executive branch and on Capitol Hill. When political debate revolves around retrenchment rather than expansion, Peterson says, "the special interests do not stand much of a chance."

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## FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

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### *Chairman in Chief*

"All Rise for Chairman Powell" by Kurt M. Campbell, in *The National Interest* (Spring 1991), 1112 16th St. N.W., Ste. 540, Washington, D.C. 20036.

General Colin L. Powell's catapult into national prominence during the Persian Gulf War was not just a result of his impressive personal abilities. It was at least equally as much the product of a relatively obscure military reform measure that dramatically strengthened the position of chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). This measure, the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, "stands as one of the most important, yet unheralded, military reforms in U.S. history," says Campbell, a former special assistant on the Joint Staff who now teaches at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

Before the 1986 reform, the Joint Chiefs of Staff—consisting of the chiefs of staff of the Army and Air Force, the chief of naval

operations, the commandant of the Marine Corps, and the chairman—made decisions by committee and could act only by consensus. "The result was often the worst kind of military decision and advice," Campbell says, with conflicting interests and interservice rivalries producing joint advice so broad as to be useless. The rivalries also "seriously handicapped" military planning. That was especially apparent, Campbell says, in the failed attempt in 1980 to rescue the American hostages in Iran. There was no single military commander in charge of the overall mission, but instead an Army commander for the ground portion, a Marine in charge of helicopter operations, and a separate Air Force commander.