

Periodicals

liament as a Conservative in 1837. At the time, Sir Robert Peel was struggling to reconstitute the Conservative Party from the wreckage created by the Whigs' Reform Act of 1832, which extended the franchise to most middle-class men and thus undercut the power of the landowning elite, represented by the Tories. Peel's solution, according to Gelernter, was "a pale pastel Toryism, a watered-down Whiggism that attracted some Whigs but inspired no one."

Disraeli was a man of many contradictions, and one of them was an ability to harbor deep convictions while simultaneously playing the master political operator. When Peel decided in 1846 to bid for Whig votes by repealing the Corn Laws, the tariffs on imported grain that benefited landowners at the expense of city dwellers, Disraeli led the opposition, split the party, and brought Peel's government down. The very next year, he came out *against* such protectionist laws.

While the Conservatives would later form new governments, it would be 28 years before they again commanded a clear majority in the House of Commons. "That gave [Disraeli] the time he needed to refashion the wreckage into a new kind of party." Rather than continue with Peel's "watered-down Whiggism," he wanted to expand the party's base to include workers and others. He was an important force behind the Reform Act of 1867, which gave the vote to many city workers and small farmers.

In reshaping his party and conservatism, says Gelernter, Disraeli acted out of a belief "that the Conservative Party was the *national* party," that it must "care for the *whole nation*, for all classes," at a time when the Left was appealing to the working class to unite internationally. As Disraeli saw it, conservatives were no less progressive than liberals. But conservatives carried out change, in his words, "in deference to the manners, the customs, the laws and the traditions of a people," while liberals fol-



Benjamin Disraeli was the "master political operator" of Victorian England.

lowed "abstract principles, and arbitrary and general doctrines."

Disraeli served briefly as prime minister in 1868. Returned to office in 1874, when he was 70 years old, he pursued a strong foreign policy, bringing India and the Suez Canal under the direct authority of the Crown and restoring British prestige while helping to redraw the map of Europe at the Congress of Berlin in 1878. At home, new legislation dealing with health, housing, the environment, trade unions, and working conditions constituted, according to one biographer, "the biggest installment of social reform passed by any one government in the 19th century." In summarizing Disraeli's life, Lord Randolph Churchill wrote: "Failure, failure, failure, partial success, renewed failure, ultimate and complete triumph."

Liberalism's Last Prayer

"Faith Full" by E. J. Dionne, Jr., "Fact Finders" by Jonathan Chait, "Not Much Left" by Martin Peretz, and "Structural Flaw" by John B. Judis, in *The New Republic* (Feb. 28, 2005), 1331 H St., N.W., Ste. 700, Washington, D.C. 20005.

Liberalism today is bereft of ideas and "dying." So asserts Martin Peretz, editor in chief of *The New Republic*, the magazine

that may well have introduced the term *liberal* in its modern sense into the American political lexicon nearly 90 years ago, and

that has been a leading light of liberalism ever since. “Ask yourself: Who is a truly influential liberal mind in our culture?” writes Peretz. “Whose ideas challenge and whose ideals inspire? Whose books and articles are read and passed around? There’s no one, really.”

Once there were such giants as Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971), “the most penetrating thinker of the old liberalism.” But Niebuhr, with his pessimistic view of human nature, is largely forgotten in liberal circles these days. “However gripping his illuminations, however much they may have been validated by history,” says Peretz, “liberals have no patience for such pessimism.” Religion in general has been in bad odor with many liberals in recent years, notes Dionne, a columnist for *The Washington Post*. “How strange it is that American liberalism, nourished by faith and inspired by the scriptures from the days of abolitionism, is now defined—by its enemies but occasionally by its friends—as implacably hostile to religion.”

Liberals no longer have “a vision of the good society,” laments Peretz. For years now, “the liberal agenda has looked and sounded like little more than a bookkeeping exercise. We want to spend more, they [conservatives] less. In the end, the numbers do not clarify; they confuse. Almost no one can explain any principle behind the cost differences.”

Chait, a senior editor at the magazine, sees the absence of “a deeper set of philosophical principles” underlying liberalism as a strength. Unlike conservatives, he says, liberals do not make the size of government a matter of dogma. “Liberals only support larger government if they have some reason to believe that it will lead to material improve-

ment in people’s lives.” Its aversion to dogma makes liberalism “superior as a practical governing philosophy.”

“But there are grand matters that need to be addressed,” insists Peretz, “and the grandest one is what we owe each other as Americans.” Instead of taking on that difficult task, he says, liberals continue reflexively to defend every last liberal governmental program of the past and to seek comfort in leftover themes from the 1960s—the struggle for civil rights and the dangers posed by the exercise of U.S. power. They refuse to recognize the immense gains that blacks have made over the past three decades. And though they no longer regard revolutionaries as axiomatically virtuous, many still won’t face up to the full evil of communism—or to the present need to combat Islamic fanaticism and Arab terrorism. “Liberalism now needs to be liberated from many of its own illusions and delusions,” Peretz contends.

Yet even without its other difficulties, “liberalism still would have been undermined” by dramatic changes in the international economy since the 1960s, says Judis, a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Facing stiffer competition from abroad, U.S. manufacturers fought harder against unionization and federal regulation. And as businesses moved manufacturing jobs overseas and hired immigrants for service jobs at home, labor unions—a crucial force for liberal reform—lost much of their clout. “To revive liberalism fully—to enjoy a period not only of liberal agitation, but of substantial reform—would probably require a national upheaval similar to what happened in the 1930s and 1960s,” Judis writes. That “doesn’t appear imminent.”

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

What War on Terror?

“The ‘War on Terror’: Good Cause, Wrong Concept” by Gilles Andréani, in *Survival* (Winter 2004–05), International Institute for Strategic Studies, Arundel House, 13–15 Arundel St., Temple Pl., London WC2R 3DX, England.

The global war on terror has become such an accepted part of America’s foreign-policy thinking that the Pentagon has created an

acronym for it (GWOT), and two service medals to honor those engaged in the struggle. What began as a metaphor has evolved