

Believers and Citizens

“Church Meets State” by Mark Lilla, in *The New York Times Book Review* (May 15, 2005),
229 W. 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036.

The reelection of George W. Bush has provoked a spate of lengthy articles in the press on the role of religious values in American life and set Democrats to devising new strategies to appeal to the religious Center. However, the crucial battle may well involve the debate over religion’s role in the American past, contends Lilla, a professor of social thought at the University of Chicago.

Religion was airbrushed out of many modern accounts of the making of America, and scholars such as Mark Noll of Wheaton College have done useful work in pointing out its prominent role. But the new thinking has its own shortcomings. Historian Gertrude Himmelfarb’s *The Roads to Modernity* (2004) correctly highlights the point that British and American thinkers of the Enlightenment opposed the radical anticlericalism of their French counterparts. Yes, says Lilla, the Founding Fathers and other Anglo-American thinkers saw religion as an important support that would help form new

citizens by teaching self-reliance and good moral conduct. But they “shared the same hope as the French *lumières*: that the centuries-old struggle between church and state could be brought to an end, and along with it the fanaticism, superstition, and obscurantism into which Christian culture had sunk.” The Founding Fathers gambled that the guarantee of liberty would encourage the religious sects’ attachment to liberal democracy and “liberalize them doctrinally,” fostering a “more sober and rational” outlook. The idea, says Lilla, was to “shift the focus of Christianity from a faith-based reality to a reality-based faith.”

For most of the 19th century, the approach worked. By the 1950s, theological liberalism represented the mainline religious consensus. But in the past 30 years, the mainline groups have retreated before resurgent evangelical, Pentecostal, charismatic, and “neo-orthodox” movements that have attracted not just Protestants but



Although many of the Founding Fathers viewed religion as an important source of self-reliance and moral teaching for the country’s citizenry, the separation of church and state became one of America’s inviolable principles, as suggested by this 1871 Thomas Nast cartoon.

Catholics and Jews as well.

A similar collapse of theological liberalism occurred in Weimar Germany after the devastation of World War I. Defeated Germans abandoned the liberal-democratic religious Center for a wild assortment of religious and political groups as they searched for a more authentic spiritual experience and a more judgmental God. So far, says Lilla, the most disturbing manifestations of the Amer-

ican turn—the belief in miracles, the rejection of basic science, the demonization of popular culture—have occurred in culture, not politics. But Americans are right to be vigilant about the intrusion of such impulses into the public square, because “if there is anything. . . John Adams understood, it is that you cannot sustain liberal democracy without cultivating liberal habits of mind among religious believers.”

Freedom's the Liberal Ticket

“Taking Liberty” by William A. Galston, in *The Washington Monthly* (April 2005), 733 15th St., N.W., Ste. 520, Washington, D.C. 20005.

Here's a remedy for liberals despondent at their low standing with the American public: Stop going against the American grain, and put freedom back in liberal thinking and discourse. Not the conservatives' flawed notion of freedom, in which government is usually seen as a threat, but rather the evolving liberal conception, championed by 20th-century progressives from Theodore Roosevelt to John F. Kennedy, in which government can act to advance freedom.

“Government is [not] the only, or always the gravest, threat to freedom; clerical institutions and concentrations of unchecked economic power have often vied for that dubious honor,” argues Galston, interim dean of the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy and a former deputy assistant to President Bill Clinton for domestic policy. The free market, left unrestrained, often works to undermine “the moral conditions of a free society.” And economic, social, and even familial dependence can damage character just as much as long-term dependence on government can.

Liberals became disenchanted with the cause of freedom during the Vietnam War, which led them to reject all efforts to extend freedom abroad. Conservatives picked up the fallen banner and won the public over to their conception of freedom. In response, liberals turned to the courts and redefined the liberal agenda in terms of fairness and equality of results. Most Americans remain unpersuaded—and liberals remain out in the cold.

“In the real world,” contends Galston, “which so many conservatives steadfastly refuse to face, there is no such thing as freedom in the abstract. There are only specific freedoms.” Franklin Roosevelt famously identified four: freedom of speech and of worship, freedom from want and from fear.

In contrast with *freedom of*, which points toward realms where government's chief role is to protect individual choice, *freedom from* points toward a responsibility to help citizens avoid unwanted circumstances. When Social Security was introduced, for example, Roosevelt justified it as promoting freedom from want and protecting citizens and their families against “poverty-ridden old age.”

“Liberals seldom talk about Social Security or other programs in terms of freedom,” notes Galston, but they should. Take universal health care. It would free countless people now trapped in their jobs by the need for health insurance to pursue other opportunities. Or take individual choice. Liberals should embrace it when it serves their principled purposes—by supporting individual retirement savings accounts, for example, not as part of Social Security but as additions to it.

In foreign affairs, says Galston, President George W. Bush's “faith in the transformative power of freedom . . . is not wholly misplaced.” But “contemporary conservatism, with its free-lunch mentality,” has a hard time admitting that freedom requires sacrifices, such as higher taxes in wartime.